Searching for Gold

Patty Randall
New Albany Middle School
prandall@new-albany.k12.oh.us

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Abstract

This 2003-2004 study examines the effects of a writing program that included success orientation, individualized goals, and specific feedback on student writing. The program, based on the John J. Collins Writing program, follows the writing progress of two seventh grade language arts classes in an affluent, suburban middle school over a course 11 weeks. The study found that students are very successful when they are able to work on writing criteria within their zone of proximal development and are given specific feedback on their work.

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Searching for Gold

Like a miner searching for gold, I spent the 2003-2004 school year looking for and then mapping out a writing program that would meet the needs of all of my students and help them achieve their maximum potential. I teach 7th grade writing classes in an affluent suburb in Ohio, and prior to implementing the new program, I felt very ineffective as their language arts teacher because I was not effective at maximizing all students’ learning.

How could I offer my students the golden education they deserved? The answer lies with assessment. Prior to the program, I developed a different writing rubric for each writing assignment. With each writing assignment, new writing concepts were introduced and taught, and these concepts would then be assessed. I would take hours to grade their papers, write general comments, and use editing marks to point out mechanical errors, yet I would still see the same errors repeated. Unfortunately, most students were rarely applying my written feedback.

Even my gifted writers were not excelling under this program because they had largely mastered the concepts being taught. They never needed to ask me questions on any of the papers, and when I graded their papers, there was rarely ever an error in their writing. My feedback to them was primarily praise. While I was giving too little time to my other students to learn new concepts and develop their skills, I was not giving my gifted students concepts quickly enough to maximize their potential.

The Miners Who Have Struck It Rich

To help me develop the “golden” writing program, I turned to the literature to identify the components of a successful writing program. From my research, I concluded that a successful writing program is based on three tenets: individualized goals, success orientation, and specific feedback. The John J. Collins writing program is very close to meeting these three tenets, so I decided to model my program after his with some alterations in my feedback and focus points.

The Writing Program

For my study, I chose to use two of my 7th grade language arts classes. I introduced the program to both classes on January 6, 2004, and after five papers, concluded the study on March 28, 2004. Following Collins’ lead, I based my writing program on differentiation to address the individual needs of my students.
and made sure that they had chosen focus points that were appropriate and within what Vygotsky
called their “zone of proximal development” (Eggen and Kauchak, 2004, p. 59).

Students were working with a list of 27 focus points. The list began with the easier focus points and then worked to more difficult focus points. Students selected three focus points for their first paper and placed their easiest focus point to master in the collection box. I chose the fourth focus point for them, and it was placed in a one-slot box. I then looked over their rubrics, and made sure that they had chosen focus points that were appropriate and within what Vygotsky would call their “zone of proximal development” (Eggen and Kauchak, 2004, p. 59).

Next, I designed a writing rubric for the students (See Figure 2). The writing rubric contained four boxes. The top box is a collection box with nine slots for focus points and remains empty until students are successful in correctly exhibiting the specific focus point in their writing. Once students excel on a focus point in the lower three boxes by receiving a “4,” then the focus point is moved to the collection box where students continue to work on mastery. The other three boxes with one slot each was for students to write in new focus points or continue to work on focus points that they had not excelled at on the previous paper.
The students were graded on a four-point scale for each box. A four was superior, three was good, two was satisfactory, and one was needs improvement. There were four boxes, and each box received a score. Although the collection box had room for nine focus points, it received one score, so it would not skew the grade. After each paper, students received a new rubric. Focus points that had received a “4” on the previous rubric were written into the collection box on the new rubric. The focus points that received a “3” or lower were written into the one-slot box with one focus point per box. If there were any empty boxes, then the student, with teacher direction, selected a new focus point.

There was room for only nine focus points in the collection box. A focus point was considered “mastered” when it was “pushed” out of the box. In other words, the oldest focus point was removed when a newer focus point that had received a four did not have a slot. It would take a student at least four papers to “master” a focus point because he or she would need to earn a “4” rating on all four focus points selected for four consecutive papers.

If a focus point was moved to the collection box, and the student received a three on the focus point, then the whole box received a three. The focus point became a “problem” and was removed from the box and placed in a one-slot box. If there was no room for it, then the newest focus point that had been chosen was removed from the rubric to make room for the

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<td><strong>Name</strong> ___________________</td>
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<td><strong>Writing Rubric</strong></td>
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Focus Collection Box *If you receive a three on any of these points, then the focus point will be taken out of the box to be reworked again.*

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/4 points

Focus Point ___ 1st Try ___ 2nd Try ___ 3rd Try ___ One error, and I’m out!

/ 4 Points

Focus Point ___ 1st Try ___ 2nd Try ___ 3rd Try ___ One error, and I’m out!

/ 4 Points

Note: This is the writing rubric I designed to grade papers. With my help, students selected focus points to write in on their rubric. Any focus point receiving a “4” would go in the collection box which can hold up to nine focus points. A focus point is considered mastered when it is needed to be removed to accommodate a newly scored “4” focus point.
problem focus point. A student had three tries to move a focus point to the collection box. If on the fourth paper, he or she had not succeeded, I handed the paper back to him or her for revision, and there was a grade penalty.

Assessing the Focus Points
When reviewing papers, I graded and wrote specific and concise comments only on the focus points. If I found an error related to the focus point being assessed, then I lead the student in the direction to finding a way to correct the error. For example, if a student had more than one idea in a paragraph, I asked if he or she could find the sentence that did not support the topic sentence. If I noticed a particular focus point done well, I wrote why it was done well. For example, instead of writing “good” by an introduction, I wrote “I’m really impressed by how you grabbed my attention by your first sentence.”

Pyrite or Gold?
To measure the success of the program, I examined the number of focus points the 37 seventh graders covered on each of the five papers over three months. I also wanted to take a careful look at improvements made by an at – risk writer, an average writer, and a gifted writer.

I kept my information on a database that included student names, class periods, paper grades, paper types, focus points, scores on focus points, and my comments. I collected all of their papers so that I could examine their growth over three months. I also wrote in a journal after almost every class to help me reflect on student progress and my own teaching.

Gold! 🍁

An Overall Look at All Writers
I was interested in the number of focus points students would cover over the eleven - week period because I wanted to know if it would be feasible for students to cover all 27 focus points in a school year. I was also concerned that students would not challenge themselves and work on moving through the focus points. I wanted students to utilize my feedback to help them achieve accuracy and avoid repeating errors. Figure 3 shows the mean number of focus points being covered by students for each paper. Paper one was pre-selected, so the mean and range was four. Paper two had a range of four – seven. Students could have possibly worked on seven focus points if they had received a four on previous focus points. The mean for this paper was five. For paper three, the range was four – ten with a mean of seven, and the maximum amount of focus points students could have worked on was ten. Paper four had a range of four – eleven and a mean of seven. The highest number of focus points students could have been working on was 13. It was on this paper that I thought students really began to understand the new writing program. Paper five’s range was five – fourteen with a mean of nine, and the highest number of focus points students could have been working on was 16.
The number of focus points covered after five papers was nine. I was particularly interested in the frequency distribution of focus points covered after five papers. Figure 4 illustrates the amount of focus points covered by the 37 students in both of my classes. The maximum amount of focus points students could have covered providing they scored a four on every single focus point for five papers was sixteen. Thirty – two percent were working on 12 focus points by paper five, and the majority of them were working on nine or more focus points by paper five. Conceivably, it would be possible for many of my students to work through all 27 focus points in a school year.
A Careful Look at Three Writers

To test the effectiveness of my new approach, I looked carefully at three students’ growth across eleven weeks. I chose the case studies because I wanted to measure the improvement by focusing on a few students. The three students I followed were a gifted student, an average writer, and an at-risk writer.

Elizabeth. Elizabeth was an exceptional writer who was extremely motivated to write. She has placed high enough at Power of the Pen competitions to be asked to participate at the state level, and she is labeled as gifted in writing, reading, and social studies. She received close to 100% on every writing assignment. My initial worry was that I was not challenging her with a more complex curriculum, and I did not want her to become bored with writing.

When I started this writing program, I wanted her to improve her word choice, transitions, sentence beginnings, introductions, thesis statements, and use of adverbs. The following is an excerpt from a piece of writing prior to the initiation of the program. She was pretending that she had been “dumped” by Justin Timberlake.

> For days I have been sitting in my bed thinking about the wonderful times Justin and I had together. We both enjoyed going to the movies, my choice of course. I couldn’t help by cry when we saw Sleepless in Seatle on our first date. I know Justin felt the same way, because his eyes were watering through the movie. Although he said he had allergies, I am forced to believe that the movie truly touched his heart.

> Of course, going to the movies together was not the only thing that we managed to do. A couple days later, I joined him at a lively party hosted by the band.

Overall, the introduction to this piece does catch the reader’s attention, but I thought with the proper instruction, Elizabeth was capable of much more spectacular work. The following excerpt is from her fourth piece. It is an introduction to her research paper on astronaut training.

> The spaceship launches with a fiery blaze as numerous astronauts proudly look back on their years of extreme training and achievements. Many citizens intently stare at the television, wondering how an ordinary adult found and completed the lengthy road to becoming an astronaut. Although the media and television include every beautiful detail about space, reporters so often leave out the hard training involved before the launch day arrives. These astronauts, or “star sailors” in Latin, must use all of their time and effort to expose humans to vast worlds beyond our planet. In order to take an adventurous journey through space, astronauts must train in many simulators, practice using new technology, and learn how to mentally and physically live in space.
In order to achieve a real to life experience in space, astronauts must perform or train in numerous simulators to prepare.

I was really impressed with Elizabeth’s growth as a writer. Prior to the new writing program, she came pretty close to meeting all of the Ohio Content Standards for the seventh grade, and she could usually meet them in her rough draft. When she moved to her second paper, she basically only edited. She changed a few word choices, but most of her corrections were edits.

At the end of the 11 weeks, there was a complete difference in her drafts. She made major revisions from changing introductions, paragraph structure, and improving word choice. Every goal that I wanted her to meet before the new writing program, she met. Hopefully, she will continue to strive to be a more polished writer.

Anne. Anne was an average writer who was on the brink of becoming an above – average writer. She was very competent with writing conventions and organization, but I wanted her to start focusing more on her writing style and content. I thought the new writing program would really benefit her because she would move slowly into the new concepts, and my more specific and concise feedback would serve as a directional tool. The following is an excerpt from Anne’s first paper in the new writing program:

I have had many adventures in my life. The one I am going to tell you about has to be my favorite. It is about my trip to Disney World and what my family and I did when we arrived home!

It wasn’t until Anne’s fourth paper that I really noticed a substantial difference in her writing. By this time, Anne was working on eleven focus points, and many of them were advanced concepts such as adding adverbs and developing a thesis statement that directs the focus of the paper. The following is an excerpt from her paper about the galaxy.

There are many difficult questions about the universe, in which nobody knows the answer too. Everyday, astronomers work tremendously hard to find the answers to all of the questions we have. One of the mysteries is that nobody knows for sure whether the universe is finite or infinite in size, however, they do know that it will continue to expand.

Anne had improved her introductions, word choice, and sentence structure dramatically. This fourth paper had a much smoother flow, and she did a superb job addressing all of her focus points.
Jackson was an at-risk writer. He usually scored D’s on his writing assignments even though he tried to achieve. Developmentally, he was just not ready to work on some of the writing concepts we covered in seventh grade. Before I implemented the new writing program, I would see the same writing errors in each paper. Because of the grammatical errors, Jackson’s writing was very difficult to read and comprehend. The following excerpt is the last paragraph in a paper he wrote about learning a lesson prior to the new writing program.

Then I called another kid to come over. That lived two houses down. So then he came over. We played games all around my house. Then we called my friends brother to come over so he came over to so we played more games after that we went outside and played basketball. Then we went inside to get a drink. Then we saw my dad pull up in the driveway. So they ran out of the house then my curtains were moving. My dad saw then he said who opened the door. We said we did, then he saw my friends show so we got in big trouble. I got grounded for a while so did my brother to. That tells you that’s what can happen when you lie.

Jackson needed remedial help in sentence structure and selecting relevant details. My first goal with Jackson was to teach him how to write a sentence. Then, I thought we would work on details and paragraph structure. Finally, I wanted to work with him on the structure of an essay.

I knew that Jackson was behind, so I gave him more time to complete assignments. He would turn in his final draft to me, and I would take five minutes to look over it and give him feedback on the focus points he was working on for the paper. Jackson would then make the corrections and hand the paper in later that day or the following day depending on our class schedule for the day. Jackson really improved on sentence structure and paragraph structure. At the end of the 11 weeks, he still wrote some fragments, but they were much rarer than before I began the program. The following is an excerpt from Jackson’s fifth paper in the writing program on the three people he would invite to dinner.

I would invite Tony Stockman because he is a good basketball player and, that is who I look up to right now. I will talk to him about many things and, I will also have many questions to ask him. That would make me a better athlete at basketball or any sport. He also plays my favorite position to Point Guard. Those are the reasons why I would invite my favorite basketball athlete Tony Stockman.

Reflections. I am very happy with the progress made by my students across eleven weeks. It is conceivable that by the end of the year the majority of students will have worked through two thirds of the 27 focus points and 32% will have covered close to 90% of the focus points.

Not only was this program very beneficial to my students, it also yielded some unexpected but welcomed improvements to my teaching. Prior to the program, I was aware of students’ errors and improvements, but I didn’t really understand it fully until I began conferencing with students, evaluating the progress on focus points, and taking the time to understand their learning.
styles. Once I understood these key concepts, I was much more effective with my lesson planning. I can now send my students to eighth grade with much more confidence in their writing abilities, and know that they are prepared because I have provided the necessary scaffolding to allow them to move to the next level.

My study supports Collins’ findings that students are very successful with writing when they can focus in on specific writing criteria that is developmentally appropriate for the student (Collins Education Associates, http://estabrook.ci.lexington.ma.us/Curriculum/CollinsWritingProgram.pdf).

Polishing the Gold

Overall, I loved this program because it is individualized and helps students learn new and more difficult writing concepts without adding on to my already heavy workload. I also have the added security of really knowing my students’ strengths and weaknesses; now, I can tailor my instruction accordingly.

While this program has many strengths, there are some changes that could be implemented to improve the writing program. Next year, I would like to improve my explanation of the rubric, emphasize more the importance of reading teacher written feedback, and add more challenge to the writing program.

Explaining the procedures with past student examples could definitely improve the understanding of the program. The abstract nature of the process and the multiple rules hindered many students in the beginning of the program. Next time, I will compose a packet of a 2003-2004 student’s progress through the program and share the grading procedures and experiences with the students. I will also dedicate a bulletin board to the writing program that highlights all of the different rules with past students’ papers and rubrics.

Along with improving my explanation of the rubric, I also want to emphasize the importance of reading teacher feedback. Dr. Hinton, a professor at Otterbein College said to a class of graduate students, “Learning takes place before an assessment, during an assessment, and after an assessment” (Foundations of Educational Research and Educational Statistics, Otterbein College, 2004). I looked around at my classmates, and I could tell that some found this a novel idea. I then realized that many of my seventh graders probably do not understand the critical learning that can take place after an assessment. Next year, I will have this quotation in large, bold-faced print above my dry-erase board. From now on, each time I conference with my students, I will have them lead the conference and tell me what they have learned now that they have been assessed.

Finally, I could add more challenge to the writing program by 1) adding more focus points and 2) differentiating the assignments. If I started the program at the beginning of the year, some students would have mastered the focus points by the end of the third nine weeks. I would like
to add more focus points that could help students with their grammar and also collaborate with
the eighth grade teachers and discuss some writing criteria that the more gifted writers could be
introduced to in seventh grade. I would also like to add challenge by differentiating the product.
From working with my students, most find writing a story much easier than writing a persuasive
or informative piece. Students can write a well – developed paragraph in a narrative, but these
same students have difficulty writing a well – developed paragraph for an informative piece.
Next year, I will provide more diverse writing prompts that ask students to compare and contrast,
persuade, and inform, along with telling a story. I definitely want to provide more opportunities
to challenge my gifted writers. By polishing this new approach by improving my directions,
emphasizing the importance of feedback, and developing a more challenging curriculum, I will
have an even more golden program that allows my students to shine!

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