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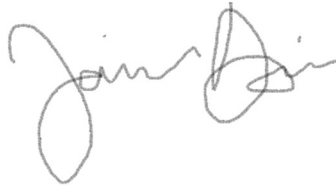
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A Student Teacher's Journey through Learning to Plan and Teach Writing:

An Autoethnography

Samantha Gill

University of Mary Washington

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Janine Davis". The signature is written in a light gray or blue ink on a white background.

Signed by supervisor: Janine Davis, Ph.D. 6/8/20

Abstract

Research has shown that the increased use of social media and texting has started to take a toll on the way students are writing. This trend of using “text-speak” in formal writing was taking place in my classroom, too. While looking for ways to help students improve their writing, I came across research that used rubrics as an instructional tool. I decided to try using rubrics during instruction to improve the writing skills of my students. Instead of studying the students, however, I decided to study myself. Autoethnography is a form of qualitative research that relies on the author reflecting on their practices and writing about their experiences. In this study, I reflected on how I planned and taught writing. The reflections that came from my research journal were used as the main data source for this study. The data from my research journal fell into four major themes: scaffolding information, adapting to situations, writing for fun versus writing for work, and using structured writing assignments. Based on these themes, I found that not only did I prefer to teach with writing assignments that have more structure, but my students also preferred them to have structure. Not only does it make completing the assignment easier for the students, but it makes it easier to grade and get feedback to students in a timely manner.

English and language arts teachers want their students to love reading and writing as much as they do, but that does not always happen. However, writing is an important skill that is used in everyday life. In school, writing is used in just about every class that students take from science to history to art. Writing is just as important outside of school - it is one of the most common forms of communication we use; emails, text messages, and letters are all written forms of communication. While there is no need to be the next Shakespeare, it is important to understand and be able to properly use the basic skills of writing.

The influence of social media has impacted students in many ways, one being the way that students write. They are using the language they use online in their academic writing and it is becoming a problem. Students are not using basic mechanics like capitalization and punctuation and some are even using text slang and abbreviations in their writing (Risto, 2014). Researchers have noticed a decline in the quality of student writing and believe that social media may be playing a part in it. The term “textism” is defined by Tayebinik and Puteh (2013) as “the use of abbreviations and other techniques to compose SMS and instant messages” (p. 97). The use of this language is taking a toll on student writing. They are practicing this type of writing more than formal and proper forms of writing.

Writing assignments can be extremely time consuming to grade, especially if students are handing in multiple drafts for feedback. When grading student work, teachers often use rubrics to help them evaluate and assess the assignments. Rubrics are a great tool because they help teachers assess student work in an unbiased manner. They also help when grading written assignments where there may not be a right or wrong answer. The teachers have the criteria in front of them, so they can easily determine the grade based on how well the criteria was met. However, students do not always see the rubric before teachers use them to grade their work.

Heidi Andrade (2001; 2005; 2005; 2010) conducted many studies on the use of rubrics and their impacts on student writing. Most of her research involves using rubrics as a tool for students to assess themselves. She found that giving students a rubric and going over it before they began writing helped them understand the assignments better but doing so did not necessarily improve their quality of writing. She is an advocate for the use of instructional rubrics versus scoring rubrics. Instructional rubrics are created with the students and are used several times throughout the writing process. Andrade (2001) has found that using instructional rubrics with students can help them better understand the criteria of the given assignment. If a teacher uses a rubric that is written in student-friendly language, then they can grade assignments quicker and not have to provide as much additional written feedback unless necessary.

The reason for this study is to help me reflect on my teaching practices as I complete my student teaching. Specifically, I will be looking at how I teach writing to students. I chose to do an autoethnography because I want to be able to conduct research on myself and see how I can improve as an aspiring teacher. It is not always possible for a full-time teacher to sit down and reflect on how each lesson went. Student teaching is a time of learning and growth, so I am taking this as an opportunity to try new teaching strategies and reflect to see if they impact the way I teach. In the study, students will be given two assignments. Students will not be given a rubric for the first assignment. For the second assignment, I will give them a rubric and we will review the criteria prior to them beginning the assignment.

Literature Review

This literature review looks at the ways in which rubrics are used to assess student writing and their impacts on the teaching of writing. Rubrics are not only used for writing assignments – teachers in all content areas can use rubrics to assess student work. For example, science teachers could use them to assess lab reports or experiments and art teachers could use them to assess portfolios. While using a rubric to grade an assignment is not always necessary or required, there are benefits to doing so. When teachers use rubrics to grade assignments, the students receive their grade while also getting some feedback as to why they received that grade. If students are given an assignment back with no rubric and just a score, then they do not have a clear idea of what improvements need to be made in order to get a better score next time.

Problems with Student Writing

Writing is an essential form of communication and is used nearly every day in various ways. According to the National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges, "employers of white-collar workers indicate they take into account how well one writes when hiring and promoting workers...Moreover, 80% of blue-collar workers report that writing is part of their job" (as cited in Graham & Hall, 2016, p. 3). No matter what path students take after they graduate, they will need to have writing skills that can help them effectively communicate with their employers and the world around them. Students may not realize that they are currently using writing nearly every day to communicate with their friends, family, and peers.

Students are practicing using communication skills every day; however, the use of social media could be taking a toll on their writing skills. According to Risto (2014), "research points to a connection between the utilization of technology for communication and a decline in student

performance specifically in regard to student writing skills” (p. 2). One of the reasons for the decline in skills is due to what Tayebinik and Puteh (2013) refer to as “textism” (p. 97). When using forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC), students are not implementing the same writing skills that would be used in professional or academic writing situations. Students are spending a significant amount of time communicating via text messages and social media, and thus are unintentionally practicing writing skills in “textism” rather than standard English.

The use of CMC is not only impacting students’ writing skills, but some researchers are concerned “that exposure to and use of unconventional spelling in texting and IMing may mask or even cause literacy problems, compromising reading, writing and spelling abilities” (Verheijen, 2013, p. 585). Due to increases in technology, students have access to several resources like spell check and grammar check that help them proof-read their work. However, these tools do not always catch every mistake and they do not help students learn how to spell properly or use correct grammar. Because of the increased use of tools like spell check, students are no longer actively looking for their mistakes and are instead relying on technology to do it for them. Students no longer need to know basic mechanics skills like capitalization, punctuation, or grammar because it is either automatically corrected for them or they are told when it is wrong and how to fix it. A study by Plester, Wood and Bell (as cited in Risto, 2014) looked at the results of a writing skills assessment taken by students who were significant texters, moderate texters, and students who did not text at all. The results of their study “indicate that the mere act of utilizing texting to communicate, not the frequency of texting, impacts students’ writing skills including misspellings and missing words” (Risto, 2014).

That study helps to pinpoint what is causing our students to struggle and underperform in their writing skills. Many students are aware that texting impacts their writing abilities. The

study performed by Tayebinik and Puteh (2012) noted in their conclusion that the participants in their study understood that “textism” was impacting their language proficiency and skills (p. 104). It is our job as teachers to help students break the cycle and continue to improve their writing and communication skills to set them up for a successful future.

Rubrics

The use of rubrics to assess student assignments is not a new concept; rubrics can be used in many different content areas ranging from elementary to higher education. A study done by Jonsson (2014) shows an example of how rubrics can be used in different content areas. His study follows three different programs using rubrics to assess student skills: a course on the development of a survey instrument, a course on the inspection of a house, and a workshop on communication with patients (Jonsson, 2014). While that study is not directly related to secondary education, it does show how versatile rubrics can be.

Types of rubrics. There are two main types of rubrics: holistic and analytic. Mertler (2001) describes the differences between holistic and analytic rubrics and how they can be used in different scenarios. Nitko (as cited in Mertler, 2001) defines a holistic rubric as one that “requires the teacher to score the overall process or product as a whole, without judging the component parts separately” (para 3). This means that a holistic rubric looks at the assignment as a “big picture” rather than the individual parts that make it up. A holistic rubric typically has two columns – one for the score and one for the description of what the score means. These scores are based on the assignment as a whole, and thus makes grading much faster. However, this means that there is limited to no feedback on the assignment to further explain the score that was given. This is because a holistic rubric is used when a few errors in the assignment can be

overlooked, as long as they do not interfere with the overall quality of the project.

The analytic rubric, however, is a more specific and focused type of rubric. Unlike holistic rubrics, analytic rubrics look carefully at specific traits of an assignment and score them individually. The individual scores for each criterion are added up and the total sum is the score of the assignment. This style of rubric is much more time consuming than the holistic which scores an assignment after one examination. When using an analytic rubric, it is expected that the person grading the assignment is only focusing on one piece of criteria at a time. Each piece of criteria should be judged separately, and the assignment should be read through each time a new piece is being assessed. While this can take up a lot of time, “students receive specific feedback on their performance with respect to each of the individual scoring criteria – something that does not happen when using holistic rubrics” (Nitko, as cited in Mertler, 2001). It is important for students to get feedback on their assignments, especially when they are more complex and have many different parts to them.

Styles of rubrics: 6+1 Writing Trait and single point. Within the two main types of rubrics, there are different styles. For the purposes of this literature review, the following styles will be looked at for assessing writing assignments. One style is the 6+1 traits writing rubric which falls under the analytic category. With this rubric, teachers are looking at seven different traits of one writing assignment: ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions, and presentation (Coe, Hanita, Nishioka, & Smiley, 2012). Presentation is the +1 trait and refers to how the paper is formatted and the layout, but this trait may not be evaluated in every assessment. The element of ongoing feedback is important to keep in mind when using the 6+1 Trait Writing rubric. Students should be getting repeated feedback on their assignments from their teachers, their peers, and self-evaluating throughout the entire writing process until they are

finished (Coe et al., 2012).

Another rubric that uses ongoing feedback is the single-point rubric. However, unlike the 6+1 Writing Trait rubric, the single-point rubric is not technically an analytic rubric. Though it is similar, the criteria is divided differently than a traditional analytic rubric. Fluckiger (2010) describes a single-point rubric as one that has “only one level of performance, the proficient level. Therefore, the single point rubric has only one set of criteria, or ‘one point,’ and that is the list of criteria that shows proficient competence appropriate to the grade” (p. 19). A single-point rubric’s scores are based on levels of proficient, not proficient, and advanced. This rubric describes exactly what students need to pass and gives lots of room for feedback if they happen to fall above or below that line. Fluckiger (2010) also mentions that students “Students can be invited to use assessment results to set do-able goals to accomplish clear learning targets” (p. 19). Students show a deeper understanding and higher engagement when they are given the opportunity to create their own goals rather than having goals given to them. Using this style of rubric helps students see exactly where they need to make improvements on, but without seeing a bad score next to it.

Using rubrics to help students. While many teachers use rubrics to evaluate student assignments, not all teachers use them as a tool to help students complete their assignments. Heidi Andrade has completed many studies looking at using rubrics to help students, specifically with writing. Most of her work was completed in the early 2000s, and many of the studies that will be mentioned in this section will be by her or include her as a co-author. Andrade (2005) believes in the use of instructional rubrics over scoring rubrics:

A rubric used exclusively by a teacher to assign grades is a scoring rubric. A rubric that is

cocreated with students; handed out; used to facilitate peer assessment, self-assessment, and teacher feedback; and only then used to assign grades is an instructional rubric. It is not just about evaluation anymore; it is about teaching. (p. 27)

She has a very specific definition and criteria for what she considers a rubric. The detail that stands out the most is the student involvement which she mentions in several of the articles she has published.

While it can be helpful to involve the students in creating rubrics, it is not realistic to have a separate rubric specific to every class. Andrade, Du, and Myeck (2010) explain that in the study their students only had some say in what went into the rubric. Rather than creating an entirely new rubric, the teacher came up with a basic rubric and the students brainstormed criteria they believed should be on it. To help come up with the criteria, they looked at examples of writing that were strong and some that were weak to model what the differences in work looked like. By involving students in the creation of the rubric, they should not have the excuse of not knowing what was expected of them or what the project was about (Andrade, 2005).

After the creation of the rubric comes the implementation of the rubric. An instructional rubric is a great tool for teachers to use to help improve student work, however it should not replace instruction provided by the teacher. In a study conducted by Andrade (2001) she noted that although students were given rubrics, they were not guaranteed to have improved scores: "...indicate the need for sustained attention to the process of writing, with the provision of instructional rubrics playing a key part – but not the only part – in providing helpful feedback to students" (p. 8). Teachers cannot solely rely on rubrics to teach and explain assignments to students. Instructional rubrics should be used as tools to give clear feedback to students. Jonsson

(2013) noted that there has been research reporting that students do not understand the feedback they are being given. If students are not able to understand the feedback we are giving them then we are not doing them any favors. In order to benefit from instructional rubrics and teacher feedback, our students need to be able to understand what we are asking of them and what the commentary means.

Rubrics can also be used as a way to provide ongoing feedback for students as they complete an assignment. Teachers can use rubrics to help facilitate student self-assessment to help them achieve mastery. Stiggins (as cited in Andrade, Du, & Myeck, 2010) states that students “should be able to use assessments in many of the same ways that teachers use them—to clarify the standards for a quality performance, and to guide ongoing feedback about progress toward those standards” (p. 5). By involving students in the assessment of their own work, teachers are helping them to understand what is expected of them and making them aware of their strengths and weaknesses. In a study by Andrade and Du (2005), one student noticed how their experience with using rubrics was impacting their writing: “After a number of papers you got like a pattern you could tell like maybe you kept doing well in this part and you kept not doing so well in a certain part” (p. 5). By continuing to give students feedback on their assignments, teachers are allowing students to improve their skills and learn more about themselves as learners. Andrade (2005) mentions that grading writing assignments can be time consuming, but that using rubrics can help cut back on time: “If I were to simply circle boxes on a rubric and give it back...I would still be providing more feedback about the strengths and weaknesses of the work than if I had just assigned a letter grade” (p. 29). Using rubrics to grade student assignments allows her to give students targeted, specific feedback within a reasonable amount of time.

Pros and cons of using rubrics. Just like with anything else, there are pros and cons to using rubrics as tools for assessing student assignments. Beginning with the cons, no rubric is going to be perfect. If a rubric is not written in student-friendly language, then the students could be confused about what is being asked of them. There is also the possibility of teachers being biased while grading. Andrade (2005) even admits to struggling sometimes:

Instructional rubrics keep me fair and unbiased in my grading. I will admit that I struggle with the temptation to assign grades based in part on irrelevant things such as effort or fondness—but not much. Rubrics keep me honest. (p. 29)

Teachers know their students, and understand that grades will vary from student to student dependent on effort, quality, and skill. However, teachers must be careful to ensure they are being fair while using rubrics to score assignments. Rubrics have clear criteria and boundaries for each score, so the teachers must be consistent in the way that they are using the rubrics to score the assignments.

While conducting research for this study, I noticed that there was a gap in the research. The studies I found were focused solely on the rubric - creating it, implementing it in the classroom, and determining its impacts on student learning. However, I did not find autoethnographic research studies conducted by student teachers. Not every master's program requires student teachers to conduct research, so that may be why there is very little published research written by student teachers.

Methods

The purpose of this research was to perform an action research study on myself as I taught writing to my students. Specifically, I wanted to determine if providing a rubric before writing assignments affected the ways in which I thought about planning and teaching writing. Many people have studied the decline in student writing skills due to the increased use of social media, and I noticed in my classes that many of my students also struggled with writing. As a student teacher, my goal is to begin developing new skills and determine the best ways to help my students become successful and confident writers.

Participants

This research was conducted in a middle school in a suburban neighborhood in Northern Virginia. The school has roughly 1,300 students from many diverse backgrounds. The demographics of the school are as follows: 44% Hispanic, 23% Black, 18% white, 9% Asian, 6% two or more races, and less than one percent of both American Indian and Native Hawaiian. The demographics of my class are similar to the makeup of the school. My research was conducted in two sections of a 6th grade language arts class with approximately 30 students each. These two classes were my extended, or advanced, classes.

This area of the county is very diverse, and many of my students speak more than one language. However not all of their parents speak English which can make doing schoolwork at home difficult for these students. They may not have the support that they need because their parents are not fluent in English, or they may speak English fluently but have difficulty reading and writing it. Students are not assigned much homework, and if they are it is usually an ongoing assignment or work they did not finish in class. All students have a study hall period every other day. This gives them an opportunity to ask teachers for additional help on assignments and finish

any work they may have difficulty completing at home.

Although my research took place in the classroom, my data collection did not focus directly on the students. Instead, I focused on my own thoughts and reflections I wrote about my interactions with students and their work.

Data Collection

My data was collected from writing reflections in a research journal. Reflections were written after each time I taught for this assignment and at the end of the assignment. I also audio recorded the lessons I taught during this study to help in my reflection. Doing this gave me a chance to reflect on what was actually said during the lesson versus what I remembered saying. The data was used to reflect on my research to determine if using rubrics as a teaching tool changed the way I thought about teaching and planned writing.

Procedure

For this action research study, I collected data over two weeks during my full-time student teaching in the Spring 2020 semester. The data I collected on myself was done through written reflections. I set up a research journal which I wrote in every time I taught a lesson that has to do with this study. While the data I analyzed was from my own journals, reflections, and self-surveys, the students in my class also completed writing assignments for me. Data from students and student assignments for this study were only collected from students who gave assent and whose parents had given consent. The students wrote a paragraph or two for each of their assignments.

The first assignment that the students completed was to write a compare and contrast paragraph on two famous Americans they researched for a project earlier in the unit. As a class,

we went over the key or signal words that they will be using when writing a compare and contrast piece of text. We then went over an example paragraph that I wrote in advance and identified where the paragraph compared the two people and where it contrasted them. I left the example paragraph on the board to serve as a mentor text for them to reference.

After going over the assignment, the students had the remainder of class to work. They had until the end of the week to complete their paragraphs. I reminded them every day in class that the assignments were due at the end of the week and that I would look over their paragraphs if they wanted to make corrections before turning them in.

For the second assignment, students were asked to write a letter to the principal outlining problems they saw in the school and solutions they had to resolve them. They were given a worksheet that gave them one side to brainstorm and one side to write the letter. They were asked to think of two problems they saw in the school. For each problem, they needed to come up with two solutions. On the back of the paper, they were to write their letter explaining the two problems and their suggested solutions. We went over how to write the letter in a way that made them come off as helpful rather than complaining and why it was important to do so.

The final assignment in this study was working with verb tenses. Students were working on keeping the verb tense consistent throughout a sentence or text. For this assignment, students were writing a story based on a prompt we chose as a class. They had to choose a verb tense and keep the tense the same throughout the entire story.

Original Plan. In this action research study, I was planning to collect data over a five to six-week period while I was full-time student teaching in the Spring 2020 semester. Due to unforeseen circumstances, which often happens in teaching, I was unable to conduct the research study as originally planned. These complications will be discussed later in the limitations

section. The original plan involved giving students two assignments, one where they would have been given a rubric ahead of time and one where they would not have been given one ahead of time. The following section describes how I originally planned to conduct this study.

In the first part of the study, the students would have only been given the assignment. We would have gone over the requirements of the writing assignment and my expectations, but the students would not have been given the rubric ahead of time. They would have only seen the rubric after their assignments had been submitted and I had finished scoring them. I was going to teach mini lessons throughout the time the class was working on the assignments. After each day's mini lesson on writing or the class worked on their writing assignment, I was going to write a reflection in my research journal explaining my thoughts and feelings about how the lesson went. When the students had turned in their assignment, I would have written a reflection on how I felt it went. My previous reflections were going to act as reminders to help me recall how earlier lessons had gone.

For the second assignment, instead of giving them the assignment and moving on, we would have gone over the details. The students would have been given the rubric that I was going to score their essays with. We would have gone over the elements of the rubric, so students had a clear understanding of the criteria and how their assignments were going to be scored. I would have taken time to answer questions students had about the rubric and encouraged them to ask questions throughout the process of completing their assignment. I was going to use elements of the rubric as the basis for my mini lessons so students would have been better informed of my expectations. At the end, I was going to score their writing with the same rubric they were given at the beginning of the assignment. Just as the first round, I was going to write a reflection after each lesson I taught and at the end of the assignment when they had turned in their writing.

Findings and Discussion

This study was developed to analyze my own actions as a student teacher and specifically answer the following question: How does providing rubrics before writing assignments impact the way I think about and teach writing in the classroom? Due to unforeseen circumstances, I was not able to conduct my research the way it was initially designed. I did not gather enough data to answer the proposed research question. However, due to the nature of the autoethnography I was still able to reflect on my teaching and come to conclusions.

In this section, I decided to combine the findings with the discussion. Since the results of the study are my own thoughts, it felt more natural to report the findings and discuss them within the same section. The quotes from my research journal entries fell into four major themes. The text that appears in italics are direct quotes from my research journal.

Scaffolding Information

When teaching students new material, it is important to build on prior knowledge or scaffold the information. Students need to understand what they are learning before they move on and try to learn something else. I ran into this issue while teaching the unit for this study. With all the writing that we were doing in class, there were several opportunities for students to edit and make changes to their assignments.

While planning the unit, I was struggling to find ways to scaffold the information I would be teaching them. With organizational patterns they don't really connect, you have to learn each individual pattern and then move on. I ... was trying to find ways to connect them so the students would have a way to practice the information they were learning.

I wanted my students to build on the information they were learning, and it did not feel like this unit had a lot of opportunities to build on prior knowledge. The unit was about different text structures, and the students were learning a new text structure every day. However, the writing assignments gave me the opportunity to help students improve their skills by building on their prior knowledge. The writing assignments were acting as formative assessments on the content the students were learning. According to Stiggins (as cited in Andrade, Du, & Myeck, 2010), students, “should be able to use assessments in many of the same ways that teachers use them - to clarify the standards for a quality performance, and to guide ongoing feedback about progress towards those standards” (p. 5).

I was cautious not to give them my suggestions first – I would ask them what they think they could do to make the sentence more clear or what changes they could make so the paragraph was more detailed.

I wanted my students to show me what they already knew. My students know to start a sentence with a capital letter and end with punctuation, so we began with those errors. That was the first thing I looked for when they brought me their paper. I did not want to overwhelm them with edits to make. This is consistent with Fluckiger’s (2010) findings, “Students can be invited to use assessment results to set do-able goals” (p. 19). I tried to make the revising process approachable by having them make corrections one at a time.

I had them read it to themselves to see if they would catch the grammatical errors they made without me pointing them out.

The second step was to have students check for obvious grammar mistakes. I found that when I read my paper aloud, I am able to find the most obvious mistakes. According to Coe et al.,

(2012), students should be getting continuous feedback on assignments from their teachers as well as self-evaluating their work. I tried to practice this when giving students feedback on their writing assignments. So once students had fixed the basic mistakes like grammar and punctuation, we moved on to more complex edits. I would find a sentence that could use some adjustments and ask them what they thought about it.

I wanted them to think of things themselves instead of just taking what I was saying as the only right answer. They're sixth graders, and therefore very impressionable and I want them to try thinking critically for themselves before they're just given the answer. I want them to have the opportunity to think for themselves and develop their skills.

At this point I did not have a rubric in mind that I was going to use to score their assignments. However, I was reviewing their assignments like an analytic rubric: we were looking at each skill individually rather than the assignment as a whole. By doing this, “students receive specific feedback on their performance with respect to each of the individual scoring criteria” (Nitko, as cited in Mertler, 2001). I was surprised by some of the edits that they came up with on their own. For most of them I had to identify a sentence for them to correct because they may not have noticed an issue otherwise. I tried to guide them to making changes using the vocabulary we had learned for the unit.

Adapting to Situations

Teaching is all about rolling with the punches and figuring out how to adapt to situations. Throughout this process, I found myself adapting to situations to meet the needs of my students. The first assignment I did for this study I had to adapt because my students did not have their work completed and they needed it for class.

Technically, this lesson was supposed to be done on Friday, but that didn't happen. On Friday, students hadn't come in with their assignment done, so we couldn't move on.

Since there were so many students who did not have their work completed, it did not seem right to move on and teach new information. They needed the assignment done before we could move on, so I gave them the day to complete the assignment. The students knew how to create a Venn Diagram, so I felt comfortable having them complete this work without taking notes first. The paragraph lesson was pushed back a day which meant I had to change the lessons for the following week to compensate for that.

The following week I had to shrink down a few lessons to make up the lost time. I decided that it was important for students to take the time to practice writing using a specific text structure. Because I moved things around, I did not have as much time to go over the lesson because students had to take notes before we began the activity.

My original plan was to write an example paragraph with the class to use as a mentor text and to show them the process. However, since things were pushed back by a day, I wrote the paragraph before class and went over it with them.

I was not able to demonstrate how to write the paragraph with them, but with the new plan we were still able to go over it as a class and look at the elements of it. Adapting to situations is a key part of being a teacher and though it was difficult, I felt confident in my ability to adapt my plans to fit the needs of the students.

Writing for Fun vs Writing for Work

As an English teacher I want students to enjoy writing and not think of it as a chore. I

found this especially true in the assignments I gave students for this study. I found throughout this study that I felt the need to balance writing for fun versus writing for work. I try to incorporate writing in units when I can because I think it is important for students to practice their writing as much as possible to build their skills. For the first assignment in this study, we were working with text structures. The students had been practicing identifying them but had not practiced using them in their writing.

Then to incorporate writing, because we hadn't actually done any writing in this unit yet, I decided to have them write a paragraph using the Venn Diagram they created with their partner in class last week.

This was not a big hit, and I got a lot of eye rolls. But I felt it was important to get them writing, so we stuck with it. There was still no rubric being used at this point. However, if I were to go back and use a rubric, I probably would have used the 6+1 writing traits rubric. The +1 of the rubric is for presentation, and having that as a criteria may have helped me think of different ways students could have presented their writing. I made a mental note to try and find other writing assignments that may be more engaging and fun for them to complete.

Of course, all assignments I give students are work, but I do not want it to always feel that way. I want my students to be engaged with the activities that they are doing in class, so I began to think of ways to incorporate more “fun” writing in class.

This lesson was originally supposed to be an individual assignment. However, we had been doing a lot of 'serious' work while practicing verb tense. We decided to switch it up and have the students write a story 'exquisite corpse' style where students write part of a story and then pass it to a classmate to continue writing it.

They had been practicing using consistent verb tense and had mostly been making corrections to sentences rather than practicing writing it themselves. I knew by having the students collaborate on a writing assignment meant I would not be able to grade their writing.

They were given two minutes to write about their prompt, and when time was up, they had to rotate papers to the left, and then continue the story in the tense that the person started their story with.

However, I felt it was more important for them to have fun than for me to take the assignment for a grade. I struggle with getting students excited about writing, so I thought by adding in a fun activity I might get them more engaged. I do feel as though there can be a balance of writing for fun and writing for work.

Another organizational pattern that students were learning was problem and solution. I cannot take credit for creating this assignment because another teacher on the team created it. The assignment had students identify problems they saw in the school and come up with solutions to solve the problems. Then, they would write a letter to the principal describing the problems they saw and how they suggest solving them.

The students were definitely engaged with this lesson when I introduced it. They liked the idea of having their concerns heard (whether the principal actually sees them or not) and being able to suggest solutions to improve the school.

This activity had them write for fun, but in a serious way. They loved coming up with problems they saw in the school and different ways to fix them. Some of their ideas were unrealistic, but they were thinking about the idea of problem and solution and that was what mattered. I had

them write a letter, which is essentially a paragraph, and they enjoyed doing it.

Seeing their engagement with this activity made me think of the study done by Andrade, Du, and Myeck (2010) where the researchers had students help them create a rubric. The students had a say in what the expectations were, and therefore did not have an excuse for not knowing what the expectations were. While this is not a direct comparison to the writing activity my students did, based on the research by Andrade, Du, and Myeck (2010), I do think they would be interested in helping create a rubric. My students like to feel heard, which was obvious when they were working on their letters to the principal. By allowing them to help create something they will use could be one way to get them involved and engaged in writing.

Structured Writing Assignments

Another common theme I found throughout this study was the difference between structured assignments versus unstructured assignments. I found that not only did my students respond differently to structured assignments, but I also felt a difference while teaching. The first assignment I taught, had very little structure to it.

Because I didn't... quite know what I wanted their writing to look like I found it difficult to give good instructions. I only knew that I wanted them to write a paragraph that compared and contrasted their two people, but not much else.

I found myself struggling to answer questions from students about this assignment. In truth, I had no idea what I was looking for.

I felt like I was forgetting things while giving instructions and the students had a lot of questions that I had to figure out answers to.

I was using the assignment more as a way for students to practice using the text structure we had just learned (compare and contrast) than as an assessment of their writing skills. The students who wanted continuous feedback were getting it, which is important according to Andrade, Du, and Myeck (2010), but the assignment still lacked structure. They did not like this assignment very much, and I think my lack of structure may have played a part in that. The students did not have a clear idea of what my expectations were, and honestly neither did I.

The next assignment I gave them had a lot more structure to it. Full disclosure: I did not create this assignment. It was created by another member of our PLC who graciously sent it out for the team to use.

Another teacher on the team created a worksheet with a side for brainstorming and a side to write the letter. I hadn't thought to create a document like that, but I'm glad the other teacher did. It helped them stay organized.

It was obviously easier to give this assignment because it was already made, however it made me stop and think about the way that I had been assigning work. I had been giving assignments that were a little more open to interpretation and the students had more freedom with how they could write. The students did not seem to engage as much when the criteria and expectations were not clear to them. This assignment, however, had clear expectations of what they needed to do.

For this lesson, students were practicing identifying problems and solutions by writing a letter to the principal.

There was no rubric for the assignment, but the structure of it seemed to stand in its place. It seemed to have a structure comparable to an instructional rubric. An instructional rubric, as defined by Andrade (2005) is, “cocreated with students; handed out; used to facilitate peer

assessment, self-assessment, and teacher feedback; and only then used to assign grades” (p. 27). The assignment clearly stated who the audience was, the format that they needed to write it in, and the criteria. It even had a letter format on the back of the worksheet for them to write their letter to the principal.

It made it much easier to give instructions because they were already written out. It also made it easier to get an idea of what my expectations were because I knew what I wanted from them – two problems and two solutions for each problem.

The students seemed to enjoy this assignment more. Part of it may have been because they were getting a chance to complain, or as I tried to remind them- “to voice their opinions,” but I think the structure also played a role.

The students really enjoyed this assignment, and I think part of it was the organization. I have found that my students really like organization and structure, which I totally agree with... Because they knew exactly what they were supposed to be doing, they were able to get it done much quicker.

I have always heard that students like rules and structure, and this proved that to me. I found that more students were engaged with this assignment than other writing assignments they had worked on. The directions for the assignment were clear to them, so they knew exactly what they needed to do and what I expected of them.

While I think it is important to give students freedom when writing, I found that my students gravitated towards assignments that had clear, organized expectations. Not only did having a more structured assignment help the students, it helped me as the teacher. I was able to give more clear directions, and it was much easier to grade this assignment.

However, because the assignment was more structured it made it easier to grade. I wasn't looking too critically at their grammar and instead was focusing on the content of what they wrote.

I went back and forth about how to grade the assignment. Should I use a standard grading rubric, or create my own rubric for this assignment? There needed to be a balance of scoring their assignment in a timely manner, but also making sure that they had met all the requirements. It can be difficult grading assignments, especially when you want students to do well. This is where rubrics can make things easier. Andrade (2005) said, "Instructional rubrics keep me fair and unbiased in my grading. I will admit that I struggle with the temptation to assign grades based in part on irrelevant things such as effort...Rubrics keep me honest" (p. 29).

I ended up scoring it based on completion: did they have all of the requirements on the front (brainstorming) and did their paragraphs on the back include both problems and solutions. While this may not have been the most effective way to grade them, it made it quick to grade.

I found that assignments with structure are quicker to grade than assignments that are less structured. Andrade (2005) says, "If I were to simply circle boxes on a rubric and give it back...I would still be providing more feedback about the strengths and weaknesses of the work than if I had just assigned a letter grade" (p. 29). Teaching at the secondary level means having a lot of students and a lot of assignments to grade at one time. By using rubrics or assignments with clear, structured criteria, it makes the grading process much easier. If I am able to give some feedback to all of my students in a reasonable amount of time, then they have more time to ask questions and get more feedback before submitting.

Implications

Conducting this study as a student teacher gave me the opportunity to reflect on my teaching practices when I otherwise may not have had the chance to do so. Not all teacher-prep programs require students to conduct research during their student teaching. While conducting research can be stressful, I found it to be very beneficial to my development as a teacher. I specifically recommend that student teachers reflect on their teaching practices, however established teachers could also benefit from reflecting on their teaching. Doing so gives you a chance to see what you are doing and change things if needed. It felt like a revelation when I determined that my students were more engaged in the assignment that was more organized. Had I not been reflecting on my teaching practices, I may not have made that connection. The autoethnography style of research is an effective way to find new ways of teaching, test those ways, and reflect on how they worked over a period of time.

I also feel it is important to get students in the classroom more involved in the writing process. While I did not get to specifically test the impact of rubrics, I was able to see that students liked the assignments where they felt heard. One way to get students involved is to create a rubric as a class. Andrade, Du, and Myeck (2010) conducted a study where they had their students help them create a rubric. They looked at writing samples that were both strong and weak to help determine what the criteria should be. By doing this, the students will have a better idea of what the expectations are because they helped design them. I would personally do this in the beginning of the year to show students you care about their input, and to teach them how to use a rubric to improve their writing.

Many students like writing with structure and clear guidelines, but not all of them. Some

students prefer more freedom when they write so they can express themselves. In the future, I would show all my students how to use a rubric to help guide their writing. This would be especially beneficial if it were a rubric that they helped create as a class, so they were familiar with it. Then, students could choose whether they want to use the rubric as a tool or not. By doing this, students would have the chance to set goals for themselves and track their progress. It would also help teachers give continuous feedback to their students.

Limitations

This study was limited because it was an autoethnography, and the results came from personal experiences and thoughts I had while conducting this study. I did not specifically use student opinions or feelings as a source of data while conducting this research. My personal thoughts and experiences are not to be taken as the experiences of all up and coming teachers and therefore the data is limited to the context of the research and is not meant to be generalizable to different contexts. As a student teacher I understand that plans go awry, and there is not much you can do but roll with the punches. This action research study, conducted in a classroom, was no exception. Although my results were limited to my thoughts, there were other obstacles that kept me from conducting my research the way that it was designed.

Consent letters. My experience with the IRB was much quicker than I imagined, so luckily that was not an issue. However, once I was given permission by both my university IRB and county IRB, I had to begin the process of getting consent and assent from my students and their parents. My research did not include much participation from students – I was not using scores from work they were turning in, I was not giving different assignments for the study, and I was not conducting any interviews or polls. I was audio recording lessons and asking permission

to use comments made by the students as quotes in this paper and in my reflections.

I only received about half of the letters back from the students, and only one of them did not give permission. However, it took around two weeks to get this many forms in and because of this I had to do one of my reflections without a recording. I did not want to record a lesson without having consent letters back. This made it a bit more difficult to reflect because I did not have the audio to refresh my memory of what happened during class that day.

Testing schedule. Most of Virginia's Standards of Learning (SOL) tests take place in mid to late April. In March, however, students in eighth and eleventh grade take the writing SOL. My students were sixth graders, so they did not take the test. However, because of the testing we were placed on a modified bell schedule for three days. On this schedule, I did not see my classes at their usual times. The students stayed in their first period all day, and the teachers rotated between classrooms to keep the noise in the hallway down.

Since students were staying in their first period classrooms all day, my students were not grouped together the way I normally see them. My students who are in my extended periods were mixed with the students who are in my general class. This made instruction extremely difficult, and we had to move around the lessons we had planned for those days. We were not able to do what we had originally planned because we were not in our classroom. Since we had to change instruction, the timing of our unit was thrown off a bit. It took a day or two to get the unit back on track after we resumed our normal schedule.

Complexities of the student teaching role. Student teaching is a wonderful experience and is so important to the process of becoming a teacher. However, it can sometimes be difficult to navigate coming into someone else's classroom and taking over their job. My mentor teacher

was great, and I learned so much from them, but like with anything there were some obstacles. As I mentioned, I cannot imagine how difficult it must be to have someone come into your classroom and take over your instruction. It must be a struggle to give up some control over the classroom and environment you have built up for six months, and as a student teacher it is intimidating to come in and do just that.

With that in mind, it can sometimes cause tensions between student teacher and mentor teacher. There are some things that a mentor teacher needs to do that a student teacher cannot do, or the mentor teacher needs to move plans around to comply with changes that the school has made. Some of the plans that I had made for this action research study were pushed back because of testing that the students had to complete. This was out of my control, and I did not have a say in the matter.

COVID-19. In March of 2020, there was talk of schools closing due to the outbreak of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) in the United States. On March 7th, 2020 the first case of COVID-19 was reported in Virginia. Students and teachers at my school started to question what was going to happen next. Teachers began to look for online resources since we had no idea what was going to happen. Class time was used to practice using websites and classroom management resources online. We wanted to ensure that students knew how to get in contact with us and check notifications in case school flipped to online learning. This put a lot of plans I had created on hold. We shifted our focus and unit to the online resources we found to keep the learning going while teaching students how to use them. This meant putting a pause to the writing assignments for the time being.

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11th,

and the next day, March 12th Governor Northam (VA) declared a state of emergency in Virginia. On Friday, March 13th, 2020, the superintendent of the county where I completed my student teaching suspended school from meeting in person until April 14th, which would have us returning to school after the scheduled spring break. We would be out of school for three full weeks, plus a week for spring break. This meant that all learning for the next three weeks would be done virtually, if at all. Not all our students have access to technology, and therefore could not complete the work assigned to them. In addition, there was to be no new work assigned to students during this time. The only thing that was allowed to be graded at this time was work that had been assigned prior to March 13th. This meant I was not allowed to assign new work to students, so I could not do any more teaching or writing assignments with them.

At one point I was considering doing one more assignment with my students when we got back in April. It would be a tight timeline trying to finish this research so close to my deadline, but it was worth a try. However, on March 23, 2020, Virginia Governor Northam issued an executive order which closed all schools for the remainder of the 2019-2020 academic school year. This put an end to my research. There was no more I could do. I had to stop my research completely. I only had two assignments for the study, and they were supposed to be practice runs. But there was no more I could do for this action research study.

Conclusion

The goal of this study was to determine if rubrics would change the way I thought about planning and teaching writing. While the study did not go as planned, I still learned a lot about myself as a developing teacher. This study was a prime example of an iterative process because I was constantly making changes and trying new things to see what would work best with my students. Not only did my students this year benefit from this process, but my future students will also benefit. The process of reflecting and making changes to lessons is something I plan to practice in my future years as a classroom teacher.

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