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The Writing Problem: Teacher Self-Efficacy and Instruction

Catherine Haskins

Abstract: Writing is a struggle for many secondary students. The Common Core State Standards and state testing have led to an increased focus on writing, but there has been little improvement in performance. This is in part because the writing problem is no longer an English Language Arts (ELA) problem. All content areas need to work to improve student writing ability. This article explores two causes of low student writing ability: low teacher self-efficacy and ineffective teacher education programs. In order for students to become better writers, teachers not only need to become better writers, but also to believe that they are better writers. And teacher education programs need to support teacher candidates with writing instruction specifically tailored to their content areas so they are prepared to teach students how to write.

Introduction

“You’re the problem!” I only half-jokingly exclaimed. I was having a conversation with a seventh grade social studies teacher about writing in his classroom. I asked how often and what type of writing he used and he said he never had his students write. “Sometimes they will write a couple sentences for an extended response, but that’s it.” My ELA mind was fuming. As I was half-way into explaining the importance of writing across content areas, he stopped me and said “Nope, that’s your problem.” It was as if he had slapped me.

“What about your own writing?” I continued to press the subject. He looked at me puzzled. “Do you think of yourself as a good writer?” I clarified.

“No, not really,” he responded. I happen to know that he *is* actually a very good writer, and his low self-efficacy surprised me.

I wish I could say that this is an isolated incident, or one particular teacher’s view on writing. Ask any secondary ELA teacher about the biggest challenge for their students, and most often they will say writing. But why? Why do so many students struggle with writing? Students are entering universities needing to take remedial writing courses. In a time of the third-grade reading guarantee, state standards, and frequent standardized tests, students are still unable to properly write.

There is no one answer for why students struggle to write. However, it is not a new problem, instead dating back to at least the late 1800’s when Harvard University implemented a writing requirement for admission (Nagin, 2003). One would think education had improved over time. “Increasingly, however, officials at graduate schools of law, business and journalism report gloomily that the products of even the best colleges have failed to master the skills of effective written communication so crucial to their fields” (Sheils, 1975, p. 1). While this quote sounds like it could come from a modern day exposé on writing at the university level, but it is actually from the 1975 Newsweek article “Why Johnny Can’t Write.” Forty years later we are *still* talking about why Johnny can’t write, so how do we solve this problem?

To answer this question, we need to look at the cycle of writing as a whole. If the teaching of writing has been an issue for at least 150 years, it is possible that the people who are teaching writing are simply not good writers. Therefore, to solve the problem of poor writing, we must start by looking at the teachers themselves.

Why is Writing Important?

Writing instruction is an ELA problem. But it is also a social studies problem. A math problem. And a science problem. All content areas use writing to some degree, whether in a lab report, a proof, or an essay about types of government. Therefore, all teachers need to know how to teach writing.

Writing also positively impacts learning. Janet Emig states that “[w]riting involves the fullest possible functioning of the brain, which entails the active participation in the process of both the left and the right hemispheres” (1977, p. 125). People learn in three ways: by doing, icons, and representation. The benefit of writing in enforcing learning is that it utilizes all three of those types of learning at the same time (Emig, 1977). Writing is unique in the way it allows the brain to function. This makes it a valuable skill and important technique in any learning environment.

Self-Efficacy

To understand how teacher self-efficacy affects the students, self-efficacy itself must first be understood. Self-efficacy is a person’s belief in their own ability to complete and succeed on a task (Jani & Mellinger, 2015); in the case of writing self-efficacy, their ability to complete and succeed in writing.

Once beyond the high school classroom, students are offered little direct writing instruction in the educational system. Students may take a couple composition classes, but then are left to their own devices. Thus “teacher candidates dislike writing; they believe that they receive inadequate instruction and feedback; and although many receive high grades on their papers and in their courses, many teacher candidates consider themselves to be poor writers” (Gallavan, Bowles & Young, 2007, p. 64). This is contributing to the low self-efficacy in teacher candidates at the collegiate level. One of the most puzzling components of self-efficacy is that many of the teachers received high marks in writing, yet they still feel they are not good writers. If an assessment is valid and reliable, an A should equal a good writer. However, the high mark alone is not enough for teachers to have high self-efficacy. While Gallavan et al. do not offer a correlation between the low self-efficacy and the professors, we can speculate it is due to limited writing instruction and a lack of specific and timely feedback from the instructor.

As a result of receiving inadequate writing instruction and feedback, students in university programs feel low-self efficacy as writers. In some cases, students are turning in papers, and not receiving feedback on them until the end of the term. Most students at the university level should be able to write without additional instruction. Even in literature courses, it is rare for a professor to spend time teaching writing skills. However, based on their survey of teacher candidates’ personal beliefs on writing, Gallavan et al. (2007) point out that this leads students to have low self-efficacy as writers.

It is important for teachers to be proficient writers in order to be able to teach writing. Not only do they need to be able to write, but they need to have high self-efficacy in terms of their writing ability. A teacher’s writing ability matters because, “teacher expertise is the most significant factor in student success” (Nagin, 2003, p. 59). This low self-efficacy causes many teachers to shy away from teaching writing because they 1) do not like it, or 2) do not think they are good enough writers themselves to teach it to students.

Teacher Education Programs

Teacher writing ability is only one component of the problem. For a teacher, being a good writer is simply not enough. It is a necessary component of pedagogical content knowledge, but in order to be a successful teacher of writing, the teacher must also know how to *teach* writing.

Teachers may have low self-efficacy as writers because they received minimal instruction on how to teach writing in their teacher education programs, especially in content areas other than ELA. Yet with the influence of the Common Core State Standards, “the role of writing in learning across the disciplines becomes more apparent,” and “every teacher has a responsibility to incorporate it in his or her classroom” (Nagin, 2003, p. 60). Therefore, teaching writing should be taking place in all teacher education programs, no matter the content area. Many, if not all, teacher education programs require at least one content reading course. Part of the course involves teaching writing to learn

strategies in all content areas. Students practice how they can implement the strategies within their particular content area. While this requirement is a step in the right direction, it still does not offer enough support to teacher candidates with their own writing, nor with how to teach writing.

Gillespie, Graham, Kiuahara, and Hebert (2014) found teachers that used writing-to-learn strategies (notetaking, short answer responses, etc.) in the classroom without ever having been taught how to properly implement them. Students do not benefit from writing just to write (Bangert-Drowns, Hurley, & Wilkinson, 2004). They need to be properly taught the appropriate skills. Yet, if the teacher does not know how to write, or teach writing, even after graduating from an accredited teacher education program, the students will not learn the required skills. A major concern is that “composition pedagogy remains a neglected area of study at most of the nation’s thirteen hundred schools of education” (Nagin, 2003, p. 5).

Teachers should feel confident entering a classroom and teaching writing relevant to their content area. However, many teachers received only minimal instruction in how to teach writing to their students. According to the Gillespie study, “most teachers reported they received minimal (47 %) or no formal preparation (23 %) during college on how to use writing to support learning, with 24 % reporting adequate preparation and 6 % reporting extensive preparation” (2014, p. 1051). Not surprisingly, language arts teachers received the most training in writing instruction.

Some teachers are using writing-to-learn strategies in the classroom, however they are often not using them correctly. Simply having the students fill in blanks or write without composing does not influence learning in the same way as writing-to-learn strategies. Yet this is essential. “With the emphasis that CCSS now places on using writing as a tool to support student learning, it is important that colleges, universities, schools, school districts, and state departments of education do a better job of preparing teachers” (Gillespie et al., 2014, p. 1066). If teachers are expected to teach writing to their students, they should receive writing instruction in their teacher preparation programs.

In order to break the cycle of poor writing ability, teacher education programs need to integrate writing instruction into their curriculum for all content areas, not only ELA. This should include two foci: improving teachers' writing ability, and teaching techniques for writing instruction. Therefore, teachers will be prepared to teach writing in a heavily tested and standard-driven era. If teacher education programs change their curriculum to include more writing instruction, future teachers will be able to teach students how to write and the cycle of poor writing will end.

Professional Development

There is still hope for teachers getting ready to start their first job, or already teaching, even if they have little idea how to implement writing to learn strategies. The answer is successful professional development opportunities that focus on writing ability. As in the teacher education programs, there need to be two components of a successful professional development: a focus on improving teacher writing ability and on teaching the teacher writing instruction strategies.

However, currently professional development, similar to teacher education programs, does not focus on writing. “[M]ost teachers reported they received minimal (45 %) or no formal inservice preparation (11 %) on how to use writing to support learning, with 38 % reporting adequate preparation and 6 % reporting extensive preparation” (Gillespie et al., 2014, p. 1051). Even if their professional development has focused on writing at times, writing instruction is always evolving and teachers should be constantly reflecting and reevaluating their teaching practices. Successful professional development opportunities can help teachers learn or strengthen not only their teaching of writing, but their own writing ability themselves. One example of successful professional development model is the National Writing Project, which began in 1973 at the University of California, Berkeley and has spread to 175 sites in all 50 states (Nagin, 2003, xi).

The National Writing Project

The National Writing Project (NWP) is a professional development opportunity that has a two-step approach, and that illustrates how improving writing and improving teachers' self-efficacy go hand in hand. First, it uses a “teachers-teaching-teachers model that draws on the knowledge, expertise, and leadership of successful classroom teachers” (Nagin, 2003, p. xi). This strategy grants more credibility to the presenters, because the people leading the program are renowned teachers from the field rather than outside consultants. Secondly, the program focuses on improving the writing ability of the teachers themselves. It places a high value on the self-efficacy of teachers: “one form of participation above all other is expected at NWP staff development: writing teachers must write” (Nagin, 2003, p. 65).

Bifuh-Ambe

Of course, the NWP is not the only effective writing professional development. To determine what makes a successful professional development, Bifuh-Ambe (2013) looked at a professional development opportunity in Massachusetts that combined elements of the National Writing Project, and the Writer's Workshop model. Bifuh-Ambe examined what makes a professional development worthwhile, and concluded that successful programs should allocate time during the professional development for teachers to focus on strengthening their own writing ability. It is also important for teachers to understand the importance of their own writing ability. Another successful component of professional development was a workshop model in which the participants were able to discuss and collaborate with other teachers.

This professional development program increased teachers' positive attitude toward writing, as well as their self-efficacy about their own writing. However, for some reason this professional development contributed to negative shifts in teachers' perception of their ability to teach writing, especially in terms of generating ideas, giving feedback, collaboration, and control of writing. Despite this negative shift, teachers reported learning new strategies and ways to implement writing instruction into their classrooms.

Conclusion

The challenge of teaching writing is not a new problem, yet the education community is still struggling with how to solve it. There are many spokes on the wheel of writing: two important ones are teacher's self-efficacy and knowledge of writing instruction. Teachers themselves need to be proficient writers, and more importantly, they need to see themselves as such. Not only will they then have a more positive attitude toward writing in general, but they will have more confidence when teaching it to their students. Secondly, teacher education programs need to include writing instruction as well as how to teach writing in ways specific to particular content areas. This will prepare a new generation of teachers to teach writing and to have a high degree of self-efficacy as writers. For teachers already in service, beneficial professional development opportunities should be offered. These include teachers-teaching-teachers approaches such as the National Writing Project, as well as other programs that focus on improving teachers' writing ability and self-efficacy. A combination of these changes can help to break the cycle of poor writing in our schools.

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