Preparing Students to Write in Professional Environments

Andrew Sanctis

University of Toledo, drewsanctis@gmail.com

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Abstract: American businesses annually spend billions of dollars in efforts to improve their employees' writing abilities in the workplace. Current methods of writing instruction are not adequately preparing students for professional environments, and in order to alleviate these issues, adaptations must be made in secondary classrooms to foster writing self-efficacy and mastery. Through the use of reflective writing activities, meaningful assignments, and lesson plans incorporating technology, teachers can help students develop as writers and better prepare them for the workforce.

Introduction

Every year, students across our nation graduate high school at a commencement ceremony, symbolizing the start of their new lives. When they enter the workforce, employers expect them to be proficient in basic skills and knowledge so they can adequately perform the tasks asked of them. Why is it, then, that so many graduates are unprepared when it comes to their basic writing skills? According to a 2004 report by the National Commission on Writing for America's Schools, Families, and Colleges, American businesses annually spend up to $3.1 billion in order to improve communication skills in the workplace. these skills include writing emails, reports, and other forms of professional correspondence, as well as vocabulary, professionalism, and oral communication. How can educators address these issues in order to better prepare students for professional environments?

Developing Writing Self-Efficacy

We all know that many students dread writing, regardless of the content area. Nothing elicits audible frustration and anguish from students like a writing assignment, but does it always have to be a battle to get them to put pencil to paper? Many students are apprehensive when it comes to writing because they don't feel confident in their abilities. Psychologist and professor Bandura (1997) explained that self-efficacy, which he defines as "people's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives," plays a large role in how an individual perceives and acts upon their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors (p. 2). Bandura's research suggested that mastery experiences, or repetitions of an activity until successful, are the most effective method of creating a sense of efficacy. By repeating a task with guided instruction and improving, a person learns the skill and understands that they are capable of performing it individually in the future. This provides a student with the ability to successfully perform that same task in a different environment and on their own. Simply put, if a student learns how to write well through practice and believes that they are capable of doing so, their will alleviate their own apprehension and be able to blossom as writers.

Mascle (2013) directly addressed the parallel between self-efficacy and writing ability, Mascle (2013), expanding on Bandura's theory. According to Mascle "instructional practices that work to diminish apprehension about writing can have long-term positive effects on the writer, such as improving writing confidence" (p. 218). This foundation of self-efficacy must be in place before we can expect students to believe that they are writers. Mascle also argued that students must be offered meaningful writing tasks. One of the issues is that students often do not see the value in writing activities because they do not seem meaningful. When a student honestly believes that what they are doing lacks value, they will be less likely to take the assignment seriously. Mascle argued that one way to overcome this problem is for teachers to provide meaningful, varied opportunities to write, models of performance from poor to exemplary, and feedback from both the instructor as well as peers. In regards to assignments being meaningful, teachers should offer writing activities that students are most likely to believe foster skills which they will use in the future. These activities could include writing professional correspondence, memos, incident reports, employee evaluations, and even workplace climate surveys. The idea is to develop student proficiency with the types of writing they will likely encounter, as they will be more likely to see them as valuable activities while at the same time improving skills such as grammar and mechanics.

Reflective Writing

While educators are explicitly responsible for preparing students with the skills (such as writing) they will need to succeed, ethics, values, leadership principles, and character development are also a large part of a school district's mission, and these traits must be molded in order for students to succeed after high school. It is not uncommon for a

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school's mission statement to directly state that its purpose is to prepare students to be productive citizens. With that in mind, how can character development and leadership be incorporated into a classroom? While character development and leadership are often discussed in social studies classrooms, they can also be incorporated into ELA classes, as well. One way is for the students to engage in what is referred to as reflective writing, where students write specifically about themselves. This is an excellent way to make the activity personal and meaningful to the students since they are the topic of their own work. Through reflective writing, they can be pushed to think critically about who they are, including about their own strengths and weaknesses, thus developing an awareness of areas of themselves that might be improved.

By reflecting about themselves as citizens and leaders through writing, students can be brought to analyze their own roles, how they can be effective in these roles, how to better set goals (both personally and professionally), and they can also investigate leadership theory and practice (Lawrence, 2013). Such activities can also nurture civic responsibility. Social studies classrooms are not the only place in which civic responsibility can be discussed, just as English classrooms are not the only place where writing can be taught. Through reflective writing strategies, teachers across content areas have the opportunity to engage their students with activities that require critical thinking about individuals and society as a whole. By doing this, teachers can foster character development so that students not only envision themselves as productive citizens, but also as employees who have a developed sense of themselves and their place in society. These reflective activities can lead students to examine and develop themselves as professionals, and since they are writing activities, can at the same time sharpen writing skills necessary for the business environment. Sentence structure, tone, audience, purpose, spelling, and punctuation are all possible focal points of these writing activities, which serve a dual purpose of improving the "hard" and "soft" skills necessary for success in business. This idea was emphasized by Lawrence when she explained that reflective writing "has the potential to better prepare students for the realities of the business setting they will soon enter" (p. 203).

Content Standard Creativity

Teachers are well aware that there are certain expectations of what they should be teaching in their classrooms. Argumentative essays, for example, are a staple of the ELA classroom, but outside of academic environments, will most students ever write another one after they graduate and enter the workforce? Writing emails, on the other hand, will be a common task in almost every career field, especially as technology has advanced and become the standard medium of communication. Teachers have a responsibility to prepare students for both college and employment and must take into account what types of activities they are teaching in order to provide the most benefit. The challenge is designing lesson plans and activities that align valuable writing activities with the current content standards. While this might seem a daunting task, it is possible to accomplish.

The Ohio College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards (2017) address the skills expected of students but do not mandate assignments that teachers must use to develop these skills. For instance, comprehending and clearly articulating ideas, writing for a purpose, and demonstrating understanding and usage of point of view, tone, audience, and word choice are all included in these standards. While it is expected that students end the year with grade level proficiency in these skills, teachers have a lot of autonomy in how they teach them to their students. By designing lesson plans that are relevant and valuable, teachers can incorporate activities which teach to these standards while still preparing students for their futures. One example is teaching student to write effective emails. Writing an email is relatively simple conceptually. An individual has something to communicate, so they write a short form of correspondence and hit the send button. It seems like a simple assignment, but it can be used in multiple ways. Is the author a supervisor, a peer, or a subordinate? Who is the recipient? What message are they trying to convey? Is it a simple request, a disciplinary action, a proposal, or a congratulatory e-mail? Standards relating to purpose, audience, and tone can be incorporated into this simple assignment, merely by having the students change roles. While students are developing their writing skills in regards to the standards, they are also learning about how the greeting, body, and salutation of an e-mail are properly formatted, developing their skills as young professionals before entering the workforce. By being creative with the content standards, teachers can provide valuable activities that allow students to develop professional skills and self-efficacy.

Work-Study Programs

Students attending career centers or earning their high school diplomas through work study programs are often overlooked. Unfortunately, these students are often stigmatized as low-achievers, but they enter society with the same diplomas as a traditional student, the only difference being that many of these individuals will enter directly into the workforce without further academic training. For these students, high school is the last opportunity to develop their writing ability in an academic setting. Therefore, it is essential that teachers do everything in their power to properly prepare them, as they are less likely to receive direct instruction in writing after they graduate. These students in

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particular can benefit from lessons with meaningful and relevant writing activities directly related to the students' field of study. Kohn (2015) has argued that students often do not see the connection between academic and workplace writing, arguing for the benefits of mentorship programs that connect academics and the workforce. While Kohn's research focused on business students at the collegiate level, his argument applies across levels. Students fortunate enough to have a robotics lab, or certification programs for electricity, for instance, can complete writing assignments that correlate to what they are learning and what they are likely to produce in that field. For example, an expository paper that articulates what went wrong with a robotics project and how it might be improved could be a valuable opportunity for a student not only to master their content, but also to address writing standards regarding purpose, central ideas, and language usage. And since career-tech instructors typically have years of experience in their fields and know what types of writing will be expected of students after gaining employment, they can teach authentic writing skills in their subject area.

Technology

For several reasons, including a lack of resources or a teacher's own low self-efficacy, some teachers still teach using traditional methods instead of using a multifaceted approach incorporating technology. In some classrooms every assignment is hand-written despite students openly expressing their distaste for writing; lectures bore students, who quickly begin daydreaming; and the resources that are available collect dust on tables in the back of the classroom. While these traditional methods have some value to, technology is an integral part of our daily lives and shouldn't be cast aside in a classroom. Upon entering the workforce, students will have to master technology even at low-wage, entry-level jobs. Restaurant servers, for example, commonly use automated machines (and sometimes even tablets) to place orders; grocery store employees use electronic scanning guns to stock shelves; and secretaries' lives revolve around their computers and telephones. In corporate environments, a mastery of technology is even more vital, as employers will expect proficiency in developing reports, conducting meetings using technology to provide visual representations, and putting together and delivering presentations involving media. Therefore, it is essential that educators prepare students with the most current technology available to them. This will not only increase proficiency with the technology itself, but will also provide opportunities for students to develop higher levels of self-efficacy. Recent research comparing classrooms taught with traditional methods versus those which incorporated technology has shown that using technology and interactive lessons resulted in "lower apprehension levels and higher grades" (Davis, Fisher, & Forde. 2009, p. 11). Student engagement, improved self-efficacy, and writing skill improved through the use of SMARTBoards and more modern teaching strategies. This suggests that the use of technology may help improve writing self-efficacy and mastery.

Conclusion

Currently, many students are entering the workforce unprepared in terms of their writing abilities. Changing this may appear to be a monumental task, but by altering their teaching strategies and activities and incorporating more technology, educators have the opportunity to better prepare their students for success. By focusing on improving students' self-efficacy as writers, teachers can help them develop the confidence and skills to perform proficiently in the workforce. As Bandura (1997) stated, "individualized instruction tailored to students' knowledge and skills enables all of them to expand their competencies" (p. 12). If teachers reflect upon what students truly need to be successful after graduation, they can tailor their instruction in order to adequately prepare them for the realities of the workforce, while remaining within the confines of the curriculum and state standards.

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About the author: *Andrew Sanctis earned a Bachelor of Arts in English from Wright State University in 2010, and a Master of Education from The University of Toledo in 2017. He is teaching 8th grade English at Zenith Accelerated Learning Academy in Kissimmee, Florida.*