

National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASET)

THE PRACTICAL TEACHER

This Month's Topic:

Integrated Writing Instruction

Students with writing disabilities typically find the act of writing to be both difficult and unrewarding. These students' resulting lack of motivation to write can lock them into a downward spiral, in which they avoid most writing tasks and fail to develop those writing skills in which they are deficient. Indeed, for some students, a diagnosed writing disability may not be neurologically based but instead can be explained by the student's simple lack of opportunities to practice and build competent writing skills.

MacArthur and colleagues (MacArthur, Graham, & Schwartz, 1993) developed an integrated approach to classroom writing instruction designed to accommodate the special needs of disabled writers, as well as those of their non-disabled peers. In this instructional approach, the student writes about authentic topics that have a 'real-world' purpose and relevance. Student writing is regularly shared with classmates and the instructor, with these audiences creating a sustaining social context to motivate and support the writer. Students receive instruction and feedback in an interactive manner, presented both in lecture format and through writing conferences with classmates. Technology (particularly computer word processing) is harnessed to help the writing disabled student to be more productive and to make use of software writing tools to extend his or her own capabilities in written expression.

The instructor follows a uniform daily instructional framework for writing instruction. First, the instructor checks in with students about the status of their current writing projects, then teaches a mini-lesson, next allows the group time to write and to conference with peers and the teacher, and finally arranges for the group to share or publish their work for a larger audience.

Status-checking. At the start of the writing session, the instructor quickly goes around the room, asking each student what writing goal(s) he or she plans to accomplish that day. The instructor records these responses for all to see.

Mini-Lesson. The instructor teaches a mini-lesson relevant to the writing process. Mini-lessons are a useful means to present explicit writing strategies (e.g., an outline for drafting an opinion essay), as well as a forum for reviewing the conventions of writing. Mini-lessons should be kept short (e.g., 5-10 minutes) to hold the attention of the class.

Student Writing. During the session, substantial time is set aside for students to write. Their writing assignment might be one handed out by the instructor that day or part of a longer composition (e.g., story, extended essay) that the student is writing and editing across multiple days. When possible, student writers are encouraged use computers as aids in composing and editing their work. (Before students can compose efficiently on computers, of course, they must have been trained in keyboarding and use of word-processing software).

Peer & Teacher Conferences. Writers need timely, gentle, focused feedback from readers of their work in order to improve their compositions. At the end of the daily writing block, the student may sit with a classmate to review each other's work, using a structured peer editing strategy. During this discussion time, the teacher also holds brief individual conferences with students to review their work, have students evaluate how successfully they completed their writing goals for the day, and hear writers' thoughts about how they might plan to further develop a writing assignment.

Group Sharing or Publishing. At the end of each session, writing produced that day is shared with the whole class. Students might volunteer to read passages aloud from their compositions. Another method of sharing might be for the students to post their work on the classroom wall or bulletin board for everyone to read and respond to. Periodically, polished student work might be displayed in a public area of the school for all to read, published in an anthology of school writings, read aloud at school assemblies, or published on the Internet.

References

MacArthur, C., Graham, S., & Schwarz, S. (1993). Integrating strategy instruction and word processing into a process approach to writing instruction. *School Psychology Review*, 22, 671-681).

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