Expanding the writing process to accommodate students with learning disabilities

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In “Reading expository text: The challenges of students with learning disabilities” (The NERA Journal, 2002, 38:2), we wrote: “There is substantial evidence that for most of our students, expository reading poses a challenge that contributes to their difficulty in becoming successful in literacy learning” (p. 49). It is our contention that the same is true with expository writing. We propose that students find expository writing a most challenging and daunting academic task for the very same reasons that they find reading expository text difficult. As stated in the article: “Expository text is difficult because of the very nature of its organizational structure—exposition being rooted in classical rhetoric which is ‘learned’ rather than ‘acquired’ rhetoric (e.g., Anderson & Armbruster, 1988; Garner et al., 1986; Olson, 1990). (p.49) In order for students to become successful in both reading and writing expository text, they are required to have prior knowledge, understanding of linguistic features such as the use of passive voice, reiterations, and registers that are different from those used by writers of a literary genre, including use of abstract and/or technical vocabulary. Consequently, students who find it difficult to read expository text may experience more difficulty in writing them. The complex process of writing, particularly expository writing, poses difficulty among students, in general, and among students with learning disabilities, in particular (e.g., Englert, 1990b as cited in Hallenbeck, 2002; Wong, 1997). Nevertheless, students with LD are presented with the same expectations for writing expository text across grade levels.

Hallenbeck (2002) asserts that:

Scott and Vitale (2003) elaborate on the complexity of writing tasks particularly for students with LD which result to compositions that are often judged to be of lower quality than the compositions of their peers (cited from Harris & Graham, 1992; Stewart, 1992). However, they also suggest that in spite of the difficulties, it is possible to teach the necessary skills and processes to students so that they are able to express their ideas competently.

The question, then, is: What can be done to assist students with LD in developing their competence in expository writing?

One approach is offered by Hallenbeck (2002) who did a study exploring the potential of an instructional writing model to enable students with LD “to move beyond the ‘learned helplessness’ so common among adolescents with learning disabilities… to see themselves as genuine writers and to employ the writing process as a tool for effective written expression” (Abstract, p. 227).

COGNITIVE STRATEGY INSTRUCTION IN WRITING (CSIW)

In mid-November the teacher began modeling the CSIW essay text structure by using the entire process to write a paper of his own, emphasizing through think-alouds the thought processes of an experienced writer. He chose a topic with which the students were familiar. "After the teacher had modeled each step in the writing process (i.e., planning, organizing, writing, editing, and revising), the students completed the same steps with papers of their own on topics of their choice. The teacher emphasized that the first paper would be written very slowly and carefully and that the students would be expected to write their second paper—a research paper—with minimal assistance from the teacher. Students were asked to write pretest papers in September and posttest papers in May in order to gauge their writing process. (p. 230)

Student collaboration throughout the writing process involved two papers during the course of the year. Hallenbeck describes the collaboration as follows:

They [the students] were asked to form two partnership pairs: each student would be the primary author of one paper and the secondary author of another. The primary author took the lead in topic selection and had final say in all matters, but the secondary author was expected to contribute extensively at all stages of the writing process. …

The students used the Internet, references, CDs, and the CSIW strategy to prepare their papers. Incorporating research added an investigational dimension to the students’ work and served to reinforce the natural integration of reading and writing. Work on the research papers continued literally until the very end of the school year—May 29. (p. 231)

It appears that the use of Cognitive Strategy Instruction in Writing (CSIW) has empowered the fourth seventh-grade students with LD as writers. Among the major insights gained from the analysis of these students’ pretest and posttest papers, transcripts of instructional sessions and student collaborations, and teacher’s documented observations and reflections include: (1) Teacher modeling and scaffolding of the thinking processes allow students with LD to internalize these processes and incorporate them not only in their own writing, but also scaffolding the writing of their partners (p. 237); (2) The revision stage of the writing process provides the most structured opportunities for authors to scaffold one another’s writing (p. 240); and (3) Collaborative writing provides opportunities for students to “try out” their ideas on others, as well as to experience the support of peers as they develop their writing skills… employing collaborative structures pays off in enhanced student understanding and independence (p. 244).
It is also imperative for teachers to recognize that:

1. Teaching expository writing collaboratively requires a great deal of time but is time well spent;
2. The writing process must be taught directly in recursive steps but that students do not lose sight of the purpose of expository writing;
3. Students should be helped to recognize ways in which thought processes developed through collaborative writing process can be applied to multiple settings; and
4. Some control over the instructional environment during periods of student collaboration have to be gradually relinquished toward independence (pp. 244–45).

THE WRITING WHEEL

Another approach that seemed to work well with students with LD is the use of the Writing Wheel. A case study on a seventh-grade student, Dave, who was identified as having a specific learning disability in written communication, complements Hallenbeck’s research findings. Scott and Vitale’s (2003) article, “Teaching the writing process to students with LD” argues that while writing is a highly complex process and a difficult activity that requires many levels of complementary skills, particularly for those with learning disabilities, it is a teachable process. (p. 220) In this study, Dave’s special education teacher implemented use of the Writing Wheel in order to help him research and write an essay describing an endangered species. The Writing Wheel “summarizes the major activities of each of the five stages of the writing process...” It has been designed to visually guide students through the entire writing process (including multistage backtracking), from the generation of initial ideas to the final publishing (p. 222). Reprint of Scott and Vitale’s The Writing Wheel is included below:

Scott and Vitale recommend that before using the Writing Wheel the teacher should first explain to students that the purpose of writing is to communicate ideas effectively to an identified audience, and that writers do this by progressing through the writing process in the five nonlinear stages on the Wheel. Then, students refer to the Wheel while completing writing projects; in the process they also begin to understand why, how, and when to use the graph as a framework for their writing projects. Both teachers and students use the Writing Wheel cooperatively to monitor the writing process. Students with LD complete one or two tasks at a time. Teachers may use partial covering that rotates around the Wheel in order to display only a few tasks at a time. By doing this, students with LD can concentrate on a few tasks without becoming overwhelmed by the complexity of the process involved in creating the final product. More importantly, during a specific task, teachers and students can work closely with each other; there is clear communication and modeling; and immediate feedback is provided. Each task on the chart is checked off as soon as it is completed and the date is recorded after each entire stage is finished. (p. 223).

It was observed that with the Wheel, Dave’s task completion levels were consistently high over the ten-day writing project period. The Wheel served as a task-specific tool that Dave’s teacher was able to use in order to help him engage productively in the entire writing process and gain writing competence. Dave himself acknowledged the support he enjoyed from using the Wheel: “It worked out because it has all the details on it—what you have to do. All I have to do is look at my Wheel. ...” (p. 223).

FINAL THOUGHTS

The challenge of ensuring that students with learning disabilities develop competence in writing expository text remains formidable. Given the complexity of expository writing, Scott and Vitale (2003) remind us that it is not surprising that students with LD experience a wide variety of writing skills deficits and are often overwhelmed by the writing expectations (MacArthur, Schwarz, & Graham, 1991). This difficulty is further exacerbated by the fact that students with LD face writing problems ranging from lower level mechanical problems such as spelling, capitalization, and punctuation (Newcomer & Barenbaum, 1991) to higher order cognitive and metacognitive problems such as planning and revision (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1986). (p. 221) Clearly, more needs to be done in our effort to develop these students’ competence in expository writing other than merely immersing them in a variety of writing experiences that either don’t make sense to them, or are overwhelmingly difficult for them to grasp. While we acknowledge that “variety,” “diversity,” “engagement,” and “emotional response” are key indicators of a literate classroom environment, and immersing students in a broad range of writing experiences, as well as inviting them into a diversity of writing opportunities and
varied ways of expressing themselves, seem to be a logical approach to teaching writing, we also recognize that we have students who require for us to rethink our approaches to teaching writing. We draw parallels to Anne DiPardo and Pat Schnack's (2004) critical synthesis of research on issues of emotionality and engagement in reading:

More recently, reading researchers' attention to issues of emotionality has been largely framed in terms of engagement (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000), the evidence suggesting that engaged reading is strongly associated with significant gains in achievement (Campbell, Voelkl, & Donahue, 1997). Some have suggested that engagement rests in part in readers' ability to enter textual worlds, to move beyond literal understanding, to question, evaluate, and rethink (Langer, 1995), and that, ideally, readers will maintain a balance between engagement and critical distance, thus allowing for both emotional experience and reflection (Nell, 1988; Oatley, 1999; Scheff, 1979). Grossman (2002) argued the need for instruction focused on fostering this imaginative and critical involvement, noting evidence that struggling readers often fail to go beyond literal comprehension (Purcell-Gates, 1991; Wilhelm, 1997). Such involvement clearly involves more than cognition alone, as entering textual worlds inevitably means empathizing with the misfortunes of others and formulating one's own response to moral and psychological dilemmas (Rosenblatt, 1938/1983). (p. 18)

We can argue that as in engaged reading, engaged writing can be strongly associated with development of writing competence. We can also argue that ability to grapple with text, to move beyond basic writing skills, to be critically involved, just to mention a few, are prerequisites to successful writing engagement. Thus, for our struggling writers, particularly students with LD, Hallenbeck's (2002) proposed CSIW approach whose theoretical framework emphasizes the sociocultural theory of social constructivism, while also drawing widely from cognitive and behavioral perspectives, seems to make sense. The approach is not limited to collaborative engagement in writing expository text but also maintains a balance of direct, guided, and self-regulated instruction, and cognitive modeling and scaffolding. (pp.228-229) By adopting writing approaches such as the CSIW and the Writing Wheel, the specific needs of students with LD in our classroom are not overlooked.

REFERENCES
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