Global Leaders’ Views on the Teaching of Writing

“This is the best day of my life!” a tenth-grade girl exclaimed as we were transitioning from the teaching of writing to a break for lunch. No, she has not just met a pop star or a YouTuber that many teen girls are obsessed with this year; she’s excited about learning. This urban high school student expresses happiness about taking part in an annual writing camp held on my university campus. What makes this writing camp different from other test-preparation intensive writing camps held each spring across the state of Texas is the opportunity for struggling high school writers to be mentored by college-aged peers, who guide the high school students in developing a persuasive essay. There is ongoing conferencing and discussion of strategies for developing a thesis as well as supporting details. Most importantly, there is a community established that provides a risk-free environment to talk about writing. Unlike the experience at the writing camp, there is often a disparity between what research says about effective writing instruction and students’ writing experiences in the classroom (Applebee and Langer 20; Smith 70); teachers often know the work of writing pedagogy theorists and practitioners; however, there may be multiple reasons as to why this writing pedagogy is not practiced in the English classroom. The research in the United States is not unique; schools around the world have similar concerns. With the interconnectedness of our world, English teachers worldwide have much to learn from each other. In this article, literacy leaders’ views on writing instruction are discussed as well as recommendations for building better writing communities.

Why is it important to discuss writing instruction at the global level? When a refugee student enters your English classroom, it may be helpful to know the philosophy and practice of writing instruction in other parts of the world to better understand your new student. As an English teacher you may want to develop a writing partnership exchange with teachers globally as a way for your students to confer with peers from other parts of the world about writing, or you may want to provide students with the opportunity to discuss world issues with other adolescents abroad. Such projects assist adolescents in building cross-cultural understanding and communication skills—and more importantly, empathy and understanding of others.

Global Writing Instruction

In Western countries, research literature explains best practices for writing instruction, which includes process-writing instruction, like a writer’s workshop. In a writing workshop classroom, literature is used as a model for writing, and the teacher is a guide. However, across the globe, writing instruction approaches vary. For example, teachers in some Asian countries do not commonly implement the writing process in their classrooms since good teaching is often viewed through a Confucian lens. Writing instructional practices may vary based on macro-level aspects, such as the government and
educational policies of individual countries (Hsiang and Graham 870). Students in Beijing are expected to honor a teacher's time and submit only the finished final paper to the teacher (Graham and Rijlaardsdam 782). In some countries, there may be a focus on copying phrases, ancient poems, and rewriting essays corrected by the teacher (Hsiang and Graham 871), such as in Macao. Some countries emphasize the product in writing over any type of process, and there is little time spent on writing instruction.

Writing practices also differ across the globe based on government expectations, testing, and teacher preparation. In a study that compared writing instruction in Portugal to Brazil, both Portuguese speaking countries, researchers found that middle school teachers spent little time teaching writing, nor did they often teach writing strategies (Simão et al.). However, these teachers viewed writing as a shared responsibility and noted that writing is the responsibility for all teachers for their students’ academic success. Also in Europe, in Flanders, which is the northern Dutch-speaking portion of Belgium, teachers primarily focus on explicit skill instruction, such as basic writing skills of spelling, grammar, and punctuation; while schools have the autonomy to decide on their own educational methods and curriculum, the government provides attainment targets for schools to meet to receive financial support. International variations to writing practices have long been noted in the research literature, most notably through the results of a large international study, the International Association for the Evaluation of Education Achievement (Purves). What educators can learn from this study is that writing practices worldwide differ based on educational systems, government requirements, and what individual cultures view as best practices within education.

Survey

To better understand the views of writing instructional practices across the globe, literacy leaders were invited to participate in a survey. Participants were identified based on their affiliation as a leader within an international affiliate council of a literacy professional organization. Within this organization, there are more than 75 countries that have affiliates, including more than 40 countries with developing economies. These councils are dedicated to providing literacy support to their local and national communities. One hundred and twenty-seven international leaders who were identified as affiliate leaders were invited to participate in this survey. Prior to sending out the survey invitation, the author and her graduate assistant searched affiliate council websites, as well as employer websites, to obtain and confirm email addresses. Email addresses then were entered into a Microsoft Word Mail Merge. Each email was personalized to individuals implementing the tailored design method (Dillman et al.). The survey was then sent to the 127 individuals identified as global literacy leaders. After one week, a follow-up invitation was sent to those participants who did not complete the survey or did not respond.

Writing Proficiency

For the purpose of this article, the following question and responses are discussed: “In your opinion, are early adolescents of this generation writing more proficiently than prior generations in your country?” Participants responded with a yes/no response followed by a comment box in which they could explain their answer. Seventy-eight percent stated “no,” adolescents in their country are not writing more proficiently than prior generations; 24 percent stated “yes,” they are writing more proficiently than prior generations. The reasons included resources available for teachers and professional development available to support teachers.

The literacy leaders who believe that this generation is writing more proficiently responded with positive comments about the educational philosophy and methodology that teachers use to teach writing. For example, a participant from Afghanistan wrote, “Teach teachers to use active learning methods where more activities are done by the students. Student-centered teaching is now very common in Afghanistan.” Additionally, a literacy leader from Japan explained that in her country there was an instructional shift in the role of the student and the role of the teacher. This leader explained,

In prior generations, Japanese children had more time for writing. But the genre and topic of children’s writing were limited. They have written...
on nonfiction in their life. Nowadays genre, topic and media for writing are expanding. They try to write not only nonfiction but also fiction, advertisement, poster of scientific report, etc.

Similarly, a literacy leader from Canada acknowledged that adolescents write more in her country. In particular the leader noted that there is more time for creative writing, and Canadian teachers teach writing processes. The Canadian participant acknowledged the benefit of professional development for teachers in her country:

Teachers believe you learn to write by writing daily and reading often. They are more aware of the writing processes. Influence of Penny Kittle and Kelly Gallagher is strong. They are influenced by the 6+1 Traits.

A participant from the Virgin Islands (British) attributed an increase in student writing proficiency to greater resources available for both students and teachers in her country. She wrote,

For the most part, teachers have greater opportunity for training and learning newer strategies for teaching. Students have access to more modernized teaching aids and technology at home.

In all, even though there was a small number of literacy leaders noting that adolescent writing has improved from prior generations, those that did notice a shift acknowledged that this was a result of a pedagogical paradigm shift from a teacher-dominated classroom to a student-centered classroom; teacher professional knowledge supported the change to student-centered instruction.

On the other hand, those who responded that students are not writing as proficiently as previous generations connected that deficiency to a prescriptive, formulaic type of instruction—often a result of lack of resources, limited professional development, or an emphasis on high-stakes testing in some countries. A second participant from Afghanistan reported that adolescents in her country are not writing as proficiently; she attributes their poor writing skills to lack of resources, as well as lack of any professional development for teachers. A participant from Peru also explained that limited teacher professional development and resources may contribute to the practices she observes. She says, "In my country the writing exercise was mostly copying what the teacher wrote on the board. Free and creative writing is now being promoted in a small percentage of schools." Similarly, a participant from Venezuela explained,

Teachers are not using writing as it should be. Instead children copy long text from the board or their books. Writing workshop, creative writing, children constructing texts is not anymore present in the classroom. Before most of them understood the power of writing as a creative, constructive, purposeful process. Unfortunately at this moment they are going back to writing as a product and not as a process, instead of children understanding the complexity of writing they are copying and memorizing grammar and orthography of this complex process.

Two participants from the United States also had similar experiences to those leaders from Venezuela and Peru, noting that teachers do not teach the writing process because of the lack of time to do so in their English classrooms. One US participant wrote, "Students today are learning formulaic writing as a response to on-demand prompt writing. They are not learning the process of writing or how to improve the quality of their writing." This participant explained that she attributes this type of instruction to lack of time in the classroom to teach process writing, and lack of teacher capacity to teach writing. Lack of time to teach writing
was also acknowledged by a participant from Bangladesh as well as a participant from Finland. The Finnish participant attributed the lack of writing proficiency to the students’ language proficiency. She explains, “The school language is a minority language which doesn’t get strong support in society as it is not heard in different areas outside home and school.”

Several other participants connected different forms of technology to a decrease in student writing. A participant from India said “over involvement with cell phones” is a problem in her country. A participant from Tajikistan said, “new technology and computer are a barrier in progress of writing skills of children.” The participant explained that in her country many teachers do not think that writing skills are as necessary for young generations. A similar response came from a participant in the United States:

I think the overuse of technology in some instances has caused a decrease in students’ abilities to formulate complete and organized thoughts. Many times, students want to “text” their responses like if they were on a phone instead of developing their writing. Sometimes they think that a quick brief answer is better than giving supporting details for the reason they think the way that they do. Currently, it is all about the testing. What is tested? How will it be assessed? Not . . . what makes a good writer and good writing?

What we can learn from this response is that even in diverse countries such as India and the United States, literacy leaders have some of the same concerns. There are concerns about student writing proficiency as a result of the amount of time given for writing instruction; there is a lack of time to teach writing as a result of high-stakes testing. There are concerns about technology and how cell phones in particular devalue writing instruction.

Learning from Global Literacy Leaders

What we can learn from literacy leaders worldwide is that leaders across the globe have many of the same values as well as concerns, despite diverse economic resources, political structures, cultures, languages, and demographics. These literacy leaders view writing as important and recognize the significance of a process-based approach to the teaching of writing, as well as the importance of authentic writing experiences. Leaders recognize that professional development is imperative to teacher development. Literacy leaders play an important role in the literacy success of a school.

The last survey question requested recommendations for building writing communities within schools. The literacy leaders provided many recommendations; their recommendations are grouped into three main categories.

Recommendation 1
Support teachers in connecting the teaching of reading to writing instruction. Provide professional development for using mentor text as support for writing instruction. Consider the advice of a leader in Peru,

Develop the habit of reading. - Read aloud to your students and ask them to write a story by changing characters. - Take the students to interesting places and ask them to write about it. - Ask them to write about a very significant problem for their community.

A leader from Sweden also advises,

Make children read a lot, don’t forget to clarify the differences between spoken and written language, and let children express themselves freely in writing every day, to make it a habit.

Recommendation 2
Recognize that everyone is a writer. Show excellent examples of writing; write together. Literacy leaders worldwide acknowledged this as important. Georgia, Eastern Europe:

Teachers need to try to show how amazing and interesting is the writing process, make your children feel like writers, show them that everything they wrote is very interesting and important message for everyone.

Malaysia:

To teach writing, invite students to read and to focus on how others write.

Grenada:

Writing can be therapeutic and contagious. If teachers demonstrate that they love to write and
they can write, then the community will produce good writers.

Virgin Islands (British):

Be a writer yourself. Let students see you write. Be a model. Applaud their efforts. Share your writing.

Recommendation 3

Make writing meaningful and authentic, focusing on content development. A leader from Venezuela explained,

Let children understand that writing is a constructive complex process and not a mechanical activity where rules and forms can wait emphasizing that meaning goes first and form later. Bring opportunities of meaningful moments of writing to understand how important it is to construct meaning and later form.

As our world is interconnected through the ease of travel and technology, more research studies and practitioner articles need to report on global literacy research on teaching writing. As you can see from the recommendations of global literacy leaders, we have much in common across the globe. Each school needs a literacy leader to support teachers in teaching what they know best about writing pedagogy.

Conclusion

In closing, there is no one single approach to teaching writing, but being knowledgeable of a wealth of skills and strategies for teaching writing enables teachers to engage a divergent group of adolescents. Returning to the example of writing that began this article, English teachers have much to learn from students like the tenth grader mentioned in the first paragraph of this article. When English teachers are provided the time, resources, and professional development to create a writing community within their classrooms, they have the opportunity to change students’ lives. Stronger student writing proficiency results from students being taught skills and strategies for writing, as well as the opportunity to confer about their writing throughout all stages of the writing process. Writing practices worldwide may differ based on educational systems, government requirements, and what individual cultures view as best practices within education. However, we have much in common with our international teacher colleagues; we all want the best for our students.

Works Cited


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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

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This ReadWriteThink.org strategy guide walks through the writing process—prewriting, drafting, revising and editing, rewriting, publishing—and mirrors the way proficient writers write. In using the writing process, your students will be able to break writing into manageable chunks and focus on producing quality material. The final stage, publishing, ensures that students have an audience. Students can even coach each other during various stages of the process for further emphasis on audience and greater collaboration during editing. http://bit.ly/1TfOr61