

What We Know about Writing

Research on literacy learning during the last several decades has revealed a good deal about how students learn language, knowledge that, in turn, can support educators in making sound curricular decisions. Much of this research is characterized by observation of students in the actual processes of writing and reading, giving educators a fuller picture of these language processes and the supportive roles that we, and our students' families and communities, play in their development.

Human beings constantly interact with the world, and that includes the world of print. In the world at large, written language always occurs "in context" and includes the additional symbol systems of numbers, colors, movement and shape, as well as cultural markers. Technology and what some call "visual literacy" also play a key role in learners' lives. Students expect the print in the world to make sense and their efforts to read and write, even among those least experienced and "struggling" as readers and writers, reflect the meaning they bring to their efforts. Knowing this about learners means that school-based teaching should never ask students to check their interests and experiences at the door or teachers assume to be teaching a "blank slate." Rather, supportive teaching begins as educators tap into the diverse and rich experiences these language users have been building over their 10-14 years of life.

Another major finding documents how students learn written language. An earlier conception of linear, discrete stages of learning is flawed. Rather, students are actively building a "repertoire of understanding" rich in print and cultural knowledge. This repertoire supports their writing development from invented spelling and partial grasp of particular genre, to more conventional written language and form. Their ideas and intentions take multiple forms, including notes, lists, letters, journal writing, stories, web postings, and instant messaging. Writing within the social setting school provides offers the opportunity to further support their efforts as students talk, dramatize and draw their way into more sophisticated written language.

The development of student writing from approximate forms to conventional forms is best achieved through substantial time devoted to writing, multiple opportunities to write across the school day and focused instruction that builds from the writers' efforts. Writing development is also inextricably tied to reading development; writers grow in their ability to craft a particular genre, say poetry, through being immersed in opportunities to read, write, and to look closely at the poetry of others. Over time, and with these kinds of experiences, writing develops a voice and quality that can earn the writer membership in a particular discourse community, or as one language educator has noted, "If you want a student to sound like a lawyer, have her hang out with lawyers." Likewise, taking on the challenges of a new topic or type of writing entails learning new or different vocabulary, syntactical patterns, patterns of errors, and organizing structures. An accomplished writer of one form may seem to regress in his or her abilities when taking on a new form.

"Writing to think" is an under-utilized role of writing. Writers very rarely transfer their thoughts directly from their minds to the paper. Rather, in the very act of writing, writers can form and develop ideas, make a different sense of their experiences, change their

ideas, and find suitable ways to present their new understanding. Finding ways for learners to write informally and throughout their learning experiences, writing that is not formally developed or graded, can help learners understand and value the important role writing can play in support of learning.

The best assessment of a writer's use of and control over the strategic processes of writing is the quality of the writing produced. Unfortunately, the most reliable measures of student writing based on multiple-choice measures also measure the most partial of skills. Developing a common standard among evaluative readers is extensive work, with limited replicability. Although there has been a general move to test writing through writing tests initiated by prompts, few tests also offer writers choice of topic or opportunities to return to their initial drafts, factors that influence the quality of the writing. Yet even with these limitations, the findings of the NAEP 1998 Writing Report Card were clear: students experienced with writing more than one draft of a paper, and students whose writing was saved in folders or portfolios, achieved higher average scores than their peers who did not write multiple drafts or save their writing. An increasing number of the teachers of these students acknowledged involving students in the "writing process," or the strategic processes of drafting, prewriting, revising, and editing.

Actively involving students in the writing process, mentored by teachers who write, as well as favorite authors, helps teachers more clearly see which writers need what instruction. When that instruction is targeted and applied within the context of meaningful writing, these skills more readily become the students' own. Collecting a range of examples of written work over time allows for a valid assessment of a writer's abilities and needs.

Technology provides writers a tool in the composing process, the flexible use of texts, and in presenting new knowledge in combination with other media. Equitable access to technology is a key variable in student experience with and use of this tool.

Finally, more recent research into writing and language use clearly shows that students' knowledge reflects the communities in which they participate. The differences in students' ways of using language are directly related to the differentiation of their place in the social world. They are both positioned by their use of language, as well as able to use language in response. For all language users, the mastering of multiple social discourses allows for increased power and access to opportunity—one of the major intents of literacy education.

Writing Concepts

1. Students possess knowledge about written language and a variety of forms of writing; quality instruction reflects students' experience and knowledge.
2. All families and communities engage with literacy and literacy-related activity. Creating ways to bridge these activities and school writing experiences insures greater participation and success with school tasks.
3. The "language arts" develop in concert. Drawing supports writing, writing supports reading; opportunity to use multiple expressions of language increases language learning and ability.

4. Writing is a social activity; writing instruction should be embedded in social contexts. Students can take responsibility in shaping the classroom structures that facilitate their work.
5. Language learning proceeds most successfully when students use language for meaningful purposes.
6. Experience with a particular kind of writing is the best indicator of performance; extensive reading and writing within a particular genre or domain increases successful performance.
7. Writing is effectively used as a tool for thinking and learning throughout the curriculum.
8. Students' writing and language use reflects the communities in which they participate. The differences in students' ways of using language are directly related to the differentiation of their place in the social world. Language is a form of cultural capital and some forms of language have more power in society than other forms.
9. Assessment that both benefit individual writers and their teachers' instructional planning is embedded within curricular experiences and represented by collections of key pieces of writing created over time.
10. Language skills conventions (grammar, punctuation, spelling) are most successfully learned with a combination of carefully targeted lessons applied within the context of meaningful writing.
11. Authors and teachers who write can offer valuable insights to students by mentoring them into process and making their own writing processes more visible.
12. Technology provides writers the opportunity to create and present writing in new and increasingly flexible ways, particularly in combination with other media.