



INFORMATION SHARING SESSION OCTOBER 11, 2004 SESSION ?

PRESENTATION BY DR. CHARLES MACARTHUR

Writing Strategy Instructions for Students with Disabilities

When teaching writing to students with disabilities, a method known as cognitive strategy instruction can be very effective. The method, according to Dr. Charles MacArthur from the University of Delaware, involves showing kids how to engage in the cognitive processes involved in writing. Research has demonstrated that well-designed strategy instruction, which teaches specific strategies for planning, as well as self-regulation strategies, can produce substantial gains in writing quality for struggling writers. What these writers are missing is guidance on how to get started and how to write well, Dr. MacArthur noted. They have not had much instruction on the specific processes that good writers use.

The research foundations of strategy instruction are based on cognitive models of expert and developing writers. Researchers asked good writers to talk through the process they follow as they write. Strategy instruction involves taking what we know good writers do and teaching a simplified version of that to less sophisticated writers.

Dr. MacArthur provided a contrast between proficient writers and struggling ones.

- Proficient writers engage in a planning process that involves setting goals and subgoals based on audiences and tasks. This is an important part of deciding what you are going to say and how you are going to say it.
- Proficient writers have ways to generate content and to get their thoughts flowing.
- They are able to organize their writing using their knowledge of text structure and of how different genres of writing are organized. For example, knowing how research papers are organized helps good writers get going and know what they want to say.
- Proficient writers also have a rich set of knowledge about what makes writing good, and therefore, are better at editing and revising.
- Proficient writers are also aware that many things are going on at once during the writing process and have developed extensive self-regulation strategies. Thus, they are more able to break tasks down into more manageable parts.
- They recognize that writing is a recursive process and that parts often overlap.

Dr. MacArthur began his description of what struggling writers do with the quote, “Writing is easier for those who aren’t very good at it.”

- Struggling writers engage in a very short writing process. They do very little planning—shortly after they are given a task, they will begin the task; shortly after they begin, they will be done.



- They have a difficult time deciding what to say, coming up with sentences, and managing sentences.
- Struggling writers tend to spend a lot of time thinking about spelling and mechanics, rather than the more complicated parts of the process.
- Struggling writers also do very little revising, may not be able to read what they wrote, and likely are not asking the more sophisticated questions about writing.
- Struggling writers have difficulty both regulating their performance and coordinating what they do know about writing.

Dr. MacArthur acknowledged that this paints a very challenging picture and will be a long-term process for teachers. Despite this, strategies do exist that teachers can use to assist struggling writers. Teachers can teach students specific strategies for planning and revising their writing based on what good writers do. This involves teaching students to self-regulate through setting goals, coping with difficulties, and engaging in self-evaluation. With practice, and over time, students' writing will improve.

One of the most effective techniques that teachers can implement is teaching planning strategies based on text structure. Using knowledge of text structure or genres to plan writing is something that good writers do. Knowledge of text structure is important to good writing because it is connected to a purpose for writing, it helps to generate content and to organize a paper, and it helps with self-evaluation.

Mnemonics is an effective way to teach planning strategies. For example, Dr. MacArthur explained, teachers can use the mnemonic TREE to help students plan for persuasive writing. In TREE, the T stands for topic sentence, the R for reasons, the first E for examining reasons, and the second E for ending. Teachers should also work to connect writing to real life situations by encouraging students to think about who persuades them and why, and who they try to persuade and why. For example, elementary students know about persuading. They persuade their parents and younger siblings for any number of reasons.

Another planning mnemonic that Dr. MacArthur highlighted was CSPACE, which can be used for planning stories. In this mnemonic, C stands for characters, S stands for setting, P represents the problem, A stands for the action, C stands for conclusion, and E stands for emotion. Dr. MacArthur suggested that teachers should use a pre-test activity before introducing strategy instruction. Then, teachers can introduce a strategy like TREE or CSPACE and model thinking through each step with the students. Teachers must model repeatedly in order for students to get the idea. Students will become more involved with each modeling session until they are able to go through the process independently. Teachers can then give the pre-test writing sample back to the students and ask them what corrections or changes they would make to their writing.

Dr. MacArthur pointed out that research has shown that teaching evaluation criteria along with revision is effective. Teachers can show kids how to use evaluation criteria in the context of writing. When teaching kids evaluation criteria, teachers can also show them how to evaluate their own writing and to make the appropriate corrections. For example, to explain how to include details when writing, a teacher could show students an example of writing, and go through the story with the students, looking for examples of good detail and examples of where the writer could have used more detail. Dr. MacArthur emphasized that self-evaluation, teacher evaluation, and accountability assessments should be aligned. He also pointed out that peer revising strategies must be taught, but



although the strategy is commonly used, it is not often effective. Students do not know how to help one another; they do not want to criticize each other; and they often do not know what the teacher's evaluation strategy is. When these things are known, peer revising is much more effective. (For examples of a peer revising strategy and how to apply that to stories, see the PowerPoint presentation included in the Resources section of this document.)

After giving examples of strategies to use with struggling writers, Dr. MacArthur discussed how teachers can introduce strategy instruction in the classroom. One of the keys to effective strategy instruction is placing meaningful writing in a social context. Students are much more interested in writing if it involves people or things they know. Having a real or tangible audience is important in order for kids to understand what they are doing and why they are doing it. Dr. MacArthur also encouraged teachers to be more explicit when giving direct explanation and modeling.

Another key to effective strategy instruction is to teach students self-regulation strategies, such as self statements—things you say to yourself to stay on track or when you are confused. Teachers should include these statements in the modeling process, and personalize the statements for each student. Students should learn how to evaluate their own work and to make use of the strategies. Goal-setting is an important part of the process as well. For example, teachers could work with students to set daily goals, such as including three reasons in an essay they are working on, or to finish the conclusion that day. Teachers should be aware that it is an extended process that takes extensive guided practice.

This instruction should also be based on mastery learning. Teachers should not feel as though they must cover a lot. Instruction should be focused on the students who are having the most difficulty. Dr. MacArthur stated that four strategies taught in a year's time would be a reasonable goal, since teachers do not want to leave a strategy without students mastering it first, because then it becomes one more thing the student will struggle with in their writing. Teachers should focus on sending optimistic messages that the students can adopt, like "I couldn't do that before, but now I can because I have a strategy that I know how to use." Students must be able to see that the strategy worked, that they can use the strategy, and that their writing is better because of it.

Dr. MacArthur highlighted research done by Steven Graham. Dr. Graham conducted a meta-analysis of 39 studies and found an effect size of 1.25 in students' writing quality. Cognitive strategy instruction has been found to be effective in both classroom and tutoring situations. Specifically, the Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) model has shown to be more effective than other models—having a 1.6 effect size.

Dr. MacArthur concluded his presentation by discussing some of the implementation issues and challenges:

- Teachers should teach a few strategies intensively, and take one strategy at a time.
- Strategy instruction can and should be coordinated across teachers, grades, and subjects. For example, strategies for report writing can easily translate across disciplines.
- Strategy instruction also works well with process approaches that emphasize the social context and fits into a curriculum based on genre or purposes for writing (e.g., to persuade).

One of the challenges involved with strategy instruction is the idea that getting from single strategies to strategic learners is a long-term process. Getting kids to maintain, generalize, and integrate



strategies takes a long time and is a demanding approach for teachers. It requires explicit explanation and monitoring, and teachers also need to provide appropriate support to each student. As a result, teachers must constantly evaluate and must know their students well enough to know just how much support each one needs at any given time.



FACILITATED DISCUSSION

Writing Strategy Instructions

Ohio

This team mentioned that there has been an emphasis in their state to encourage students to focus on the content of their writing and just “getting it out,” and that using creative spelling is okay. The team asked for thoughts on this issue from the other participants. Dr. MacArthur responded by saying that kids will do what we teach them; if we want them to spell correctly, we need to teach spelling. Handwriting, Dr. MacArthur says, also matters in writing. If we want kids to be good writers, they must be able to write at a level where they are not totally focused on their handwriting.

The team acknowledged that writing and spelling skills are important, but they are faced with the challenge of older students who have difficulty with spelling, and also have a hard time revising and editing their work because there is so much text on the page. In Ohio, they are finding that secondary teachers are pointing blame at elementary teachers for not having taught the basics. However, it seems as though spelling and content instruction need to continue to be developed together—we can’t wait until spelling is proficient to start teaching content strategies. The principles surrounding why words are spelled the way they are need to be taught. Spelling is a developmental process, though more research is needed in the area. Anecdotally, it seems as though struggling spellers can only be taken so far, and spelling is one of the hardest areas to remediate.

The participants also brought up the fact that providing effective accommodations on writing assessments has been an area of great weakness across states. It seems as though states are doing a disservice to our students who are highly organized, but cannot get their thoughts into text because of motor or other issues.

Resources Mentioned

- The *Writing Without Tears* handwriting program has been very successful in Louisiana. It makes use of a variety of specialty papers that provide cues or prompts for students.
- Cognitive Strategy Instruction is most appropriate for all learners in elementary grades, and for struggling learners in secondary grades.
- Dr. MacArthur provided a list of references for strategy instruction in writing.
- The “6 + 1 Traits” writing framework mentioned in the discussion can be found at NWREL’s site: <http://www.nwrel.org/assessment/department.asp?d=1>
- Note: this is not a research-supported program.
- Washington State University has an online writing lab, The OWL (Online Writing Lab). More information can be found on their site at: <http://owl.wsu.edu/>.
- Writer’s Window (<http://english.unitechnology.ac.nz/writers/home.html>) is another online site to which students can submit their writing for feedback. Note: this site is based in New Zealand.



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