Seeing Themselves as Writers: Building on the 6 Trait Writing Process to Engage Student Authors

Writing is central to English language arts (ELA) assessment in Texas. I know this because for 10 years I worked as a middle and secondary English teacher in grade levels where students were required by the state to sit for tests gauging their efficacy in writing (in the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills [TAAS] and the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills [TAKS], respectively). I am also involved in the Central Texas Writing Project through Texas State University, where as an assistant professor, I teach methods and writing courses to undergraduate and graduate students. I see writing as crucial to ELA instruction, not just because it is assessed, but because writing is a necessary method of communication and expression.

In the spring of 2010, I began a research project investigating the critical literacy practices of an experienced educator in East Texas. I selected Sarah Matthews (a pseudonym, as are all names included here) because of her creativity and passion for teaching and her many years of experience working with culturally and linguistically diverse students. The purpose of this article is to illustrate how Sarah applies the principles of 6 Trait Writing in her daily practice to strengthen her students’ work, which results in exceptional writing quality and elevated test scores.

Sarah teaches English at Pineland Middle School, where 62% of the students are either African American or Latino, and roughly 70% of the student population is eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. Sarah began her 28th year of teaching in the fall of 2010 and credits her skills to trial and error and regular attendance at local, state, and national conferences, where she gathers ideas, materials, and fortification for her pedagogical practice. Her bookshelves overflow with workbooks developed by educators, reference books and novels, and crates of students’ writing portfolios. Students move about freely in Sarah’s classroom, which is an active space full of laughter and student voices. A bank of computers resides along one whole wall, where students type final versions of their written work, take Accelerated Reader (AR) tests, and participate in vocabulary-building activities. Walls are covered with posters offering tips about effective writing such as using dialogue and quotes, vivid verbs, and the 6 Trait Writing process.

Nearly 30 years ago, teachers, working with researchers from the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL), developed “6 Trait Writing” as a tool to enhance student writing instruction. The six traits (see Figure 1) have influenced many to develop workshops, teaching materials, and books (Burke, 2003; Culham, 2003; Jarmer, Kozol, Nelson, & Slaberry, 2000; Spandel, 2001) to assist teachers in deepening students’ writing skills.

The 6 Traits

• Ideas (details, development, focus)
• Organization (internal structure)
• Voice (tone, style, purpose, and audience)
• Word Choice (precise language and phrasing)
• Sentence Fluency (correctness, rhythm, and cadence)
• Conventions (mechanical correctness)

Figure 1. 6 Trait Writing.

As a researcher, several aspects of Sarah’s practice intrigue me. Her students work diligently on literacy pursuits, unencumbered by a direct emphasis on testing and with very little prodding from their teacher. They work well with one another, even when they do not get to self-select groups. Students also are willing to share their work with me—a virtual stranger—and explain their writing processes and challenges that date back to earlier in the year when many felt like they “just weren’t good writers.” This confidence no doubt developed as a result of practice in

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working with texts and refining writing over time, all necessary components of the 6 Trait process.

Like all master teachers, Sarah internalized the 6 Trait process and adapted it to meet the needs of her students, seeking what Moje, Young, Readence, and Moore (2000) call “ecological validity,” or the capacity to alter practices as necessary and build on the burgeoning capacity of her students. Sarah’s adaptation of 6 Trait Writing involves three ongoing instructional applications: She teaches skills recursively; uses mentor texts as a means of expanding students’ understanding of effective writing; and offers plentiful opportunities for students to refine their work, both with her input and with that of peer writers.

As a result of her adaptation of the 6 Trait Writing framework, Sarah’s students are able to wield writing as a means of expression rather than a forced assignment, and they are beginning to see themselves as writers. This transformation yielded high results for Sarah’s seventh-grade students in terms of writing assessments. At the end of the spring semester, Sarah and I were able to examine copies of students’ written responses on their TAKS to determine how well they were internalizing the ideas, notions, and teaching methods she employed throughout the school year. Of 46 writing responses, 9 were scored as a “4” (the highest rating); 33 were scored as a “3” (mid-high); and 4 of the students scored a “2” (passing). Examples from these essays follow and demonstrate the role of each of Sarah’s adaptations in the students’ writing development.

Teaching Skills Recursively

My sense is that many teachers worry about time and do not revisit skills often enough to students to feel confident in using particular literary devices or strategies, because the teacher has already moved on to the next piece of learning. Sarah benefits from working with students for multiple years because she is able to layer in a particular literacy skill whenever she examines literature with her students. Then she can require that they practice similar techniques repeatedly until the students “get it”—even if this means practicing the same skills from year to year. As a part of this recursive practice, acronyms are used continuously in Sarah’s classroom. One that she revisits almost weekly is that of HIOMAPS, shorthand for: hyperbole, idiom, onomatopoeia, metaphor, alliteration, personification, and simile. After studying these devices in terms of definition and use, students look for them in what they are reading and practice using them in their own writing. One of the prompts Sarah uses to get students to employ HIOMAPS is the topic “Your Favorite Vacation.” She asks students to take a bland response to a prompt (see Figure 2) and enhance it by incorporating hyperbole, metaphor, and so forth, into the story. Students then evaluate each other’s writing using rubrics that provide space for readers to document the writer’s use of the different devices. Examples of HIOMAPS from Sofya’s writing include “like living with lions” (simile/idiom); “blaring from the window” (hyperbole); and “stepping out of my shell” (alliteration/metaphor). Ascencion, another student, includes “I shot to the teacher’s desk” (hyperbole) and “fluffy pink pillow” (alliteration) in two of his writing samples.

In addition to the extended and repeated study of HIOMAPS, Sarah begins teaching “smiley-face tricks,” an idea she got from a workshop on elaboration, to her sixth graders, who then refine their usage in the seventh grade. Among the “tricks” are the use of figurative language, specific details for effect, the Magic 3 (a series of phrases or words that hang together, like deep blue sea), full-circle endings, humor, and hyphenated modifiers. She describes these to me as “tools that bring voice to a piece of writing or enhance sentence fluency” (S. Matthews, personal communication, May 7, 2010). Hope employs both HIOMAPS and “smiley-face tricks” in her end-of-the-year TAKS essay. Describing her best friend as the “craziest girl you’ll ever meet,” Hope goes on to say, “I loved her like a fat boy loves his chocolate,” slending simile, humor, and details. She also tries a hyphenated metaphor later in the piece when she includes, “No, I forgot, I said, with a sorry-about-thatlook.” What is especially compelling about Hope’s essay is her personal story: Hope came to the United States at the beginning of her fourth-grade year, fluent in Spanish and speaking very little English. Sarah describes her as a student who struggled with verb-tense difficulties when she entered Sarah’s sixth-grade class. By the end of her seventh-grade year, Hope’s writing was fluid, interesting, and exhibited mastery over conventions; she received a “4” on her TAKS writing, the top score possible. The consistent engagement with literary devices and writing tools yields confident writers, capable of employing language that generates interesting writing replete with the unique voices and experiences of the students.

Employing Mentor Texts to Strengthen Writing

Like many experienced English teachers, Sarah uses mentor texts to guide students’ development of both reading and writing. During an extended study of Robert Peck’s A Year Down
Yonder (2001), sixth-grade students explore several features of writing: idiom, figurative language, mood, and oral history. Sarah tells me that while the text is written at a fourth-grade level (according to the Accelerated Reader [AR] Program), she has selected it purposefully because of its rich use of language. Sarah’s expectation is that students can quickly read the book and then focus more on its features—in particular, its use of idiom.

In examining the students’ final TAKS essays, I find that they are full of rich descriptions and idioms—some that sound familiar and others that while idiomatic in structure, are clearly constructed by Sarah’s students. Among these are “grinned from ear to ear,” “what you have in mind,” “pleasing to the eyes,” and “jumped up and down like a jackrabbit.” Lexi’s description of waking up “at the crack of dawn” produces both setting and mood for a description of her family’s experience cleaning up in the aftermath of Hurricane Ike. Sofya’s use of “faces lit up the entire room,” in a story about volunteering at a local hospital exhibits sentence fluency; paired with the nervousness she describes in an earlier section, the phrase additionally offers resolution.

Students also use self-selected texts as models for writing dialogue, drawing from novels in the class, AR books, and young adult novels students brought from home. After discovering that many of R. L. Stine’s books use the word “said” repeatedly in dialogue sequences, Sarah challenges students to find and use more interesting synonyms in their own writing. They brainstorm a list of possible words and practice their use throughout the school year. “Hollered,” “retorted,” “begged,” “announced,” and “yammered on” made their way onto the list.

Comic strips offer students an opportunity to practice using these synonyms for the word “said.” In Anne’s comic “The Ultimate Prank,” she explores a conversation between two girls, Sable and Skylar. Sable asks, “Where are you going?” and Skylar responds, “Hush, I’m playing a prank on Abeni.” “Good luck with that,” Sable snorted. “She never falls for pranks.” The cartoon continues the dialogue and ends with Skylar walking into a trap she intended for Abeni, along with a drawing of a bear in a net in a tree. This example is reflective of Sarah’s classroom practice; students do more than write essays, they produce skits, art, and presentations that are the hallmark of a language-rich environment. Ultimately, many of the substitutions for the word “said” make their way into the seventh-grade students’ final TAKS essays. In fact, 38 of the 46 examined essays contain dialogue of some kind (internal or external), which suggests students’ capacity regarding conventions, clearly defined voices, and varied sentence structure: three of the six traits.

**Refining Writing**

Along with published mentor texts, Sarah asks students to gauge each other’s work for its ability to draw readers in immediately, in the first paragraph. She acknowledges that there are some hackneyed ways of doing this that lead to “cookie-cutter” writing and hamper students’ development of voice. For example, she has seen “way too many students starting papers with a question” (S. Matthews, interview, March 10, 2010) to capture the reader’s attention. To ameliorate the problem, students again go back to mentor texts to see what experienced writers do. They make an anchor chart of “Great Beginnings” and list ideas they have noticed in their favorite books. Students especially like the use of quotes, dramatic statements, humor, and onomatopoeia as a means of capturing readers’ interest. Students test these ideas out throughout the year, and by the time TAKS time arrives, they are well-versed in beginning their essays in a captivating manner. Chanel starts hers with a quote:

“...One more thing on the agenda, guys. Science Fair is coming up. We all have fun every year, but you have to be serious and get your work done...” my teacher yammered on, oblivious to my herculean [sic] effort trying to keep from dozing.

Blending onomatopoeia, personification, and figurative language, Sage writes, “Buzz! The alarm clock was bouncing off my bedroom wall. I moaned over my worst-night’s rest. The sun peaked [sic] through the window.”

Ascencion, who characterizes himself later in the essay as “a sloth with a chronic fatigue disorder” employs humor, writing the following:

Work, cleaning, and me [sic] don’t mix. If I have to I will, but you must be delirious or confused to ask me, Ascencion, to do work that involves trying to make something clean because I’ll probably make it dirtier [sic] or possibly even break it. I don’t know. I just have that touch.

In addition to drawing readers in, these captivating beginnings also exhibit tone, voice, and a mastery over language use.

This mastery does not come quickly or painlessly for Sarah’s students; by the time they sit for state-mandated writing tests, most have spent almost two years revisiting lessons about elements of effective writing and producing countless drafts of differing genres to refine their writing. From my perspective as a researcher—watching Sarah work with both sixth- and seventh-grade students—it is the repetition of key elements that helps students internalize the qualities of interesting writing well enough to reproduce them creatively in their own work. Looking through students’ portfolios—particularly when comparing the different grade levels—it becomes easy to understand students’ mastery. They’ve had a lot of practice and experience engaging in the writing process.

**Reflecting on Learning**

In the final weeks of school, students examine their writing from earlier in the year and organize it; they will refine their
portfolios to turn in for a major grade. As an example of the span of writing students complete in a school year, here is a (nonexhaustive) list of required pieces for sixth graders: a memoir, a mood story, an oral history report, an alliteration story, journals from A Year Down Yonder, a minibook based on one of Chris Van Allsburg’s picture books, an “I Have a Dream” speech, a values poster, idiom quilt writing, and a conversation story with quotations. Seventh graders are asked to complete self-evaluations, answering questions such as “Which writing sample are you most proud of?” “Which would you share with others?” “Which challenged you the most?” Which sample best defines you as a writer and why?” Students must reflect on their year as a writer to consider what they have learned and contemplate challenges ahead as they continue their writing journey.

As I sit with students at a table at the side of the room, Jasmine is reflecting on her values paper and its corresponding poster. She acknowledges it was the most difficult to write “because I never really thought about myself and how I’ve developed values in response to time with others.” It is among her favorite assignments, though, “because I got to learn more about myself and my family.” Another student tells me she doesn’t remember writing anything other than a poem during the year before in another school. When I ask, “What do you like about Mrs. Matthews’s class?” she responds, “That we get to be creative and she helps us with our work.”

That creativity and willingness to revisit skills throughout the year and in varied written products define Sarah’s practice. She tells me, “I’m weird and the students will likely never have another teacher like me, but they’re learning” (S. Matthews, personal communication, August 14, 2010). This year I have seen students playing “park bench,” where they act out a scene they have written that develops a character’s mood. I have watched students crawl around on the floor with objects like pasta, pencil shavings, candy, and paperclips poured out on a paper plate that they’re hiding from classmates. Their assignment: to look at the objects from the point of view of an ant and use sensory details to write about this experience. Students will later share with classmates, who will then attempt to guess—based on details contained in the writing—what objects match each story.

There is a persistent and collective effort to help students develop their skills as writers. By employing recursive practices, mentor texts, and opportunities to refine writing, Sarah stands as an excellent model for how to incorporate the 6 Trait process into the classroom and yield marked success and active engagement among and with students.

Books that Extend Figurative Writing:

Green, B. (1996). Beyond “Roses are red, violets are blue”: A practical guide for helping students write free verse. Fort Collins: Cottonwood Press.


For beautiful and downloadable posters highlighting the 6 Trait Characteristics visit: http://www.ttls.org/downloads/writing_strategies.htm (you can download Steve Peha’s work as PDF files and print them on colorful paper).

References


Green, B. (1996). Beyond roses are red violets are blue: A practical guide for helping students write free verse. Fort Collins: Cottonwood Press.


