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Writing For Schools

Writing is a hard journey for many high school students to navigate mostly due to misunderstandings and fear expression. Students see thesis statements, topic sentences, requirements, quotes, outlines, rough drafts and a hundred other things we teachers do to make their lives easier and they panic at the sheer weight of the project at hand. Before even beginning to outline an essay, students can get overwhelmed and say, "I can't do *all* this, I give up!" and create more of a mental block than any real mechanical problem ever could. The placement I am currently in deals with the issue of paper writing and student motivation through a focus on *the process* vs. the product, developing the teacher as the primary evaluative audience, and *control* vs. freedom in writing as the subject matter. Though these are all steps in Smagorinsky's *The Dynamics of Writing Instruction* if one step is applied incorrectly, an area is over-emphasized, or students require more clarification to move forward, the results will not be a comprehensive writing pedagogy

When it comes to argumentative writing, the process of creating a solid argument needs to be made explicit by teachers for students, to make the action of creating an argument an "evidence-based claim" (Smagorinsky 81) that will support their thesis and consider counter arguments. However, just giving students a great number of worksheets does not necessarily mean that a teacher is front-loading correctly. Let's go through the

process that my mentor teacher, Tom, guides his students through in his 9th grade special education immersion English classroom. First and foremost, the class read the novel they are going to write about, my class is reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. After reading the students have a short review, during which they learn a few broader concept words to summarize the novel with. The students will later discover that these words are the five 'theme' options for their paper prompt. Since the class is reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* the student's 'theme' options are: prejudice, ethics, justice, trust, and courage. At this point it might occur to many teachers that it is rather dangerous to hand a class of 9th graders that have never written a paper before a prompt that asks them to prove the existence of a theme when the concept was only introduced to them earlier that day. My mentor, however, remains optimistic telling the class, "this is often the best paper you will write all year," as he hands out the prompt sheets, setting high expectations for his students with a clear confidence in them. However, when examining these types of expectations one has to question if the students are adequately prepared to meet these standards. Will this be the best paper his 9th graders write all year with such limited student comprehension of these terms? Many students will go on to write about 'prejudice' in Maycomb in the 1930's but really center their paper on racial tensions; never delving into how the definitions of the two terms (racism and prejudice) correlate to one another. By not developing an understanding for the reader of how these two flaws in ethics drive Maycomb society and the plot of the novel, their papers are left with unjustified claims and unclear connections.

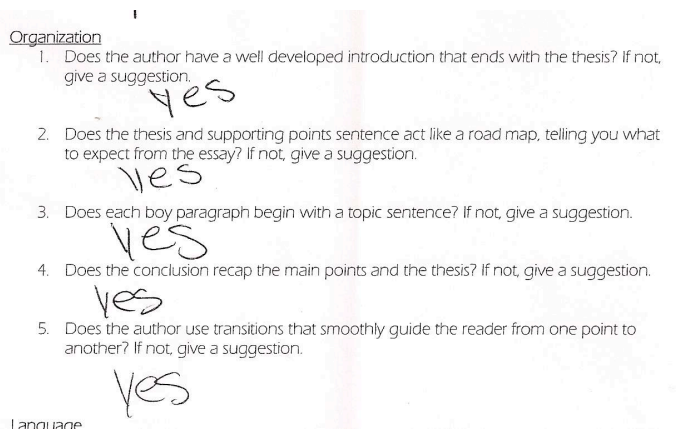
According to Smagorinsky, and his sequenced structured process approach to writing, students must have knowledge of the topic before beginning the task. As teachers

him, "What is the page number for that?" and he said, "I can't remember..." then he looked around for a second and said, "Oh, do they have to be from the book?" so he opened his book and began typing the first thing that he could see. I then asked him, "How does that prove what you were saying?" he looked confused. I pointed at the screen and said, "We have said here that Atticus trusts Calpurnica, how do you know that? What did you read that told you that?" He looked stumped for a minute more but then said, "He let's her discipline the kids". To which I replied, "Okay, so where in the book does she do that? I think it might have been chapter one right?" And then he found a quote about Scout's dislike of being disciplined and Atticus's faith in Calpurnica and he also stopped asking me for help. He was one of many students I ran into that day that struggled to understand the use of the quote as a warrant (87) to support their argument and worse still it became clear that many students had not read the text.

After the bubble chart the students prepare an outline where they must give a breakdown of all the attention grabbers, the thesis, topic sentences, book examples, quotes and conclusion sentences in bulleted form. This is where many students get stuck. Some students have told me that they, "don't outline" and after writing their paper they brag to me, "See how quickly I finished and I didn't even make a stupid outline." while, others sit back and meticulously write out their entire paper in outline format, no matter how many times you remind them what an outline is, and they cannot move past this stage fast enough. Still others blow this stage off and do not have an 'adequate' outline because they only write short sentences quickly to get it over with. However the chips fall, the majority of students I have talked to do not like this stage of the writing process or how much of their grade it counts for. It seems ultimately that teachers need to be aware of the

temperature of their classroom and remember, as Smagorinsky suggests that activities should not be “time-consuming or cumbersome” (Smagorinsky 81) and sometimes as teachers we just do not know until we try.

My mentor, Tom, then sets his expectations for the next stage preparing a rough draft, which are: “This must be as good as your final draft! I wanna see the work cited page! I wanna see all your quotes! I wanna see everything or you are not getting any points for this!!!” They exchange their ‘almost perfect’ rough drafts with a partner after completing a self-check sheet. Students are meant to be looking for position, organization, language and content. Of course because it is one student going from the global to the topical level without scaffolding they tend to focus only on grammar because it is what they are used to and the review is not modeled for them. Many students do not give each other any feedback whatsoever as they spend their time talking about their weekends, school dances and anything but the paper. Since the questions on the review sheet are vague enough to be



answered incorrectly without modeling (e.g. “Does the author use evidence from the book to support him/herself?) the students can skim each others papers and give each

Language

Image 1.1

other passing grades without trying to improve one another’s work.

This comes back to the issue of who is the audience for their writing and freedom vs. control in the classroom. With more freedom to create standards of review as a class the students would take more ownership in those standards and if they knew whom the audience of their papers were, particularly if it was not always their teacher, it

could spark creativity in the review process. However, the students are not given freedom and they must re-write their papers in the labs based on their peers critiques to hand them in the following day. And as you can see from image 1.1 it is very difficult for students as their peer critiques consist of “good job” and “yes, you did that well” which is part of the reason peer reviews need to be modeled for students, even if it is as an entire class like in chapter 6 of *The Dynamics of Writing Instruction*.

After all of this is done, the students are then handed a rubric, which they had no hand in creating and had not seen up until this point and a self-reflection, and are asked to reflect on how well they followed the rubric with their papers. There is room on both the rubric and the self-

reflection sheet for students to receive zeros. On the self-reflection sheet a zero is below the standard mark “Does not meet” and says that the student “makes no attempt” in the

	8	7	6	5	4	3
POSITION	<p>Writer meets all expectations including</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Takes a position • Introduces the position in a well defined thesis • Stays focused on the position through well defined topic sentences • Uses details and examples to adequately support the position • Reader is convinced that the position is valid • Position is well thought out and original 	<p>Writer meets all expectations except</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Position is well thought out and original 	<p>Writer meets all expectations except</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reader is convinced that the position is valid • Position is well thought out and original 	<p>Writer meets all expectations except</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses del example adequ support position • Reader convinc the posi valid • Position thought original 		
ORGANIZATION	<p>Writer meets all expectations including</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction is well developed and ends in a thesis • Thesis acts as a road map 	<p>Writer meets all expectations except</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transitions are effectively used between paragraphs 	<p>Writer meets all expectations except</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organization strengthens main argument/position • Transitions are 	<p>Writer meets all expectations except</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concluc recaps r points a effectiv up essa 		

Image 1.2

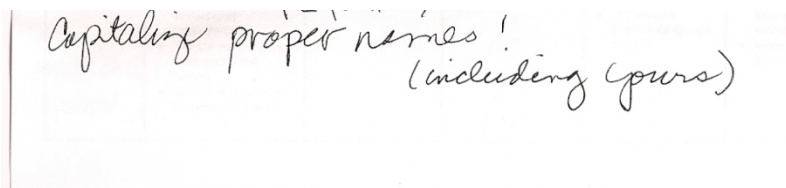
categories of “Quality of Work”

“Attitude and Interpersonal Skills” and “Initiative and Responsibility”. It also has a box for teacher assessment ominously next to the student assessment as if the two will be drastically different. The rubric, the writing process that we just went through, and

Modern Language Association (MLA) format take up 12 points out of 42, that is a drastic

point drop if you got bogged down at all by the two week long process, or lost a paper, were absent, or do not find outlines helpful. Quotes and thesis are also a hefty part of the rubric appearing in three different sections worth a total possible 9 point loss if the student does not, “Identify and disprove counterarguments” or “Create meaning for the reader despite issue complexity and depth” or “Introduce the position in a well defined thesis”. Overall, it seems some of the bigger categories on the rubric are unnecessary, such as MLA and writing process but also content and position are similar topics, just worded a little differently which ends up being two ways for students to lose points. I think of the students in, *The Dynamics of Writing Instruction*, chapter 6, and how they were overwhelmed with too many categories and the negative feelings they shared about titles like “needs improvement” and I wonder how they would feel about the idea of having a zero points column. It also leads me back to Smagorinsky’s overarching structured process approach to writing and the elements of designing and sequencing (Smagorinsky 25). Can handing the students the rubric after their paper is completed really be what is best for their confidence, motivation and academic performance? It seems the sequencing of the class would have been smoother if the students were aware of what they were going to be graded on before they wrote their papers.

On an individual case basis, Tom’s rubrics failed to reflect his teaching philosophy to the parents of his students as well as to his most successful students. During parent teacher



conferences the guardian of one of Tom’s most talented students approached him

Image 1.3

about an assignment they had got back and the lack of assessment

they had found on the rubric. Before leaving the table, she asked Tom briefly why Liam had three points taken off his essay, mentioning that they had looked over the rubric at home and that they couldn't see any explanation for the grade and "he was very upset because he worked so hard on it". Tom's only answer was that it must be in the comments because he always gives formative and summative comments and that he can't remember every essay because he reads hundreds of them. Of course in both image 1.2 and 1.3 the reader can see an example of Tom's comments on rubrics and what the concerned guardian had to look at. For the summative assessment (image 1.2) there is a number 7, floating in-between the 8 and the 6 with no explanation, highlighting, circling or indication as to why the paper did not receive all 8 points. For the formative assessment there is a quick note at the end of the rubric, addressed to the student that points out a key grammatical issue in their essay, for this student it was capitalizing words incorrectly, but no further explanation, notes, positives or suggestions on things to expand. The papers themselves receive some degree of markings but usually for grammar with little to no notes on how to elaborate on ideas, simply "expand". This parent's frustration seems founded in a lack of formative assessment for the students in this classroom.

While going through student's papers, I found the most common errors were misuses of the warrant concept (Smagorinsky 87), tense and aspect of the themes, lack of counterarguments and a clear and recognizable thesis that is arguable. Considering grammar is unfair when looking at these papers as the students had little to no grammar instruction yet in their class and one cannot grade on what one has not taught. However, counterarguments, thesis, and quote imbedding were meant to have been taught yet I still found it difficult to grade them. When I looked at their mistakes, "The blacks trusted Atticus

to win the case and not go agents tom because he was black. “ “Miss jean Louise, stand up, your father’s passing” [p.214] This quote just goes to show that they had respect for Atticus” I think that the class needed more frontloading on what it meant to make a claim in support of your thesis, why a quote should be used to support your claim and why quotes need explanation. Overall, more focus on the product and less on the process of writing a paper, an idea that Smagorinsky endorses, would create students that are more prepared to actually put it all together in essay format.

For the students in my mentor’s classrooms they feel abandoned, asked to imitate the qualities of great writers without examples or guidance and it has destroyed their motivation to learn. They are worn out, frustrated and tired. They sit with their heads on their desks, bored, saying things like, “We have done this a thousand times!” and yet over half the class is not handing in the daily work. When Tom handed back their mid-term grade reports one student exclaimed, “He is failing all of us!!” but it is a different story when one talks to Tom. One day out of frustration and hopelessness, Tom showed me all the students’ grades reports and said, “I have never had a class doing so poorly, as a whole, *and* they have five teachers in the room!” As I looked across the midterm reports I could see over half the class was earning below 50% and of those earning a failing grade only a handful of these students were failing due to late or missing work, the rest seem to be struggling with the major projects (the short story project unit and vocabulary tests) or the reading quizzes. I looked at him and said, “I just don’t understand why these perfectly intelligent kids aren’t handing stuff in, or filling out their work –I know they have read have you asked them what they don’t like so much about school?” His face got rather serious and he leaned forward, “They just don’t like learning. They aren’t like you and me. It was a hard

lesson for me too, as a young educator, that there were students out there that just aren't as eager or self motivated as we were." So it comes down to an issue of motivation for my mentor, he believes that some students will simply "never try hard" and every term you are going to get "those kids that you just know are going to fail". Smagarinsky would have to disagree with my mentor's theory on student motivation. When they teach an idea, even taking something like the fundamentals of evidence based claims, their lessons are outstanding because their students are not just intrinsically motivated but because the teachers they observed care about student interests and high expectations. Developing kids interest is equal to self-motivation and setting low expectations of interest for students is the same as pushing kids through to the next grade.

Writing that prepares kids for college and that allows them to understand the basics of grammar, quote imbedding, warrants, and counterarguments does not have to be the kind of writing that turns off students. Teaching students to write really great essays starts with getting them involved and allowing them to have some freedom with the topic. Rubrics and self-evaluations should never have a column for zero points earned. When a class does workshopping on their drafts it should be beneficial, model-coach-fade, with clear expectations and fresh eyes for global and local. Teachers have to know their students and know where they are at and what they will need support on. Sometimes the final paper turns out to be a draft because there was a mini-lesson you forgot to teach. Helping them understand and grow towards a love of writing that is both fluid and academically accepted is my goal for education.

Work Cited

Smagorinsky, Peter. *The Dynamics of Writing Instruction: A Structured Process Approach for Middle and High School*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2010. Print.