

# Teacher to Teacher

0300-52

October 2011

## The Ohio ABE Writing Project: Teachers Changing Their Writing Instruction to Help Students Succeed

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*"I will begin to loosen my expectations on the structure of the writing and focus more on getting interesting stuff down on paper."*

Why is this teacher making changes to the way she teaches writing? Because between October 2010 and May 2011, she was one of 12 Ohio ABE teachers who participated in the Ohio Writing Project to learn and share new ideas about writing instruction. Unlike traditional workshops, this writing project gave teachers the opportunity to try out new activities in their classrooms and reflect on those activities with the other teachers.

The writing project teachers met three times in Columbus and twice virtually. They also communicated with each other through a discussion list. The main component for the project was the "Developing Writers" course from the Annenberg Learner website. The course included a series of eight videos highlighting effective writing instruction, related reading, online discussion, web resources, and lessons and activities for teachers to apply in their classrooms.

Throughout the project, the teachers were encouraged and supported to take risks and try new things in their classrooms. These teachers did just that. What follows are a few examples from the project discussion list of the activities the teachers tried and the changes they made in their writing instruction. There were too many to include them all.

After watching the second video in this series and participating in the discussions, one of the boldest changes the teachers made was to write with their students and share their writing. When teachers write with their students, the students can see the writing process first hand and understand that writing isn't perfect the first time. One teacher commented, "I will definitely step out and write along with them, share our writings together, and assign them to write in pairs. These are great ways to develop a comfort and love of writing... even in the adult arena." Another

teacher wrote, "I will, this new school year, sit with students as they write. They will hear me groan and moan and say how hard it is and ask why this subject and ask how they can write when they can't spell. They will see returning students and me head for the dictionary and Thesaurus, use a speller, and ask a buddy how to spell a word."

In addition to modeling the writing process for their students, the teachers were inspired to bring in models of finished pieces of writing for the students to study. Models of good writing let students see what good writing looks like and gives them a target for their own writing. One of the participants described an activity involving models that she already does with her students: "My favorite from southern Ohio is Erma Bombeck. Erma's articles are easily read in a few minutes, or they can be copied and analyzed for audience, style and writing techniques. ... Short segments delight and inspire students to write and share events of their lives." This teacher described how she used models to help her students write instructions: "Next, we looked at several samples of written instructions and talked about which ones we thought were better than others and why."

The importance of having students write for authentic reasons was stressed throughout the video series. When students write for authentic reasons, they

are more likely to want to revise their writing. They are also more likely to write more outside of the classroom. One of the teachers gave an example of an authentic reason for her students to write: “Our city advertised that they were giving away reflective house numbers so emergency vehicles could find houses easily. So I had all of my students write and request one. We first discussed the subject line and how to address the person, using a name as suggested by the etiquette rules. We also discussed using a colon, since this was a business letter. I had them decide what we needed to include in our reply. Some wanted to be very flowery about reading it in the newspaper, when all I wanted was for them to tell the reader the address number they needed. We decided on all the information we needed.”

The eighth video in the series talked about integrating technology into writing instruction. As a result, teachers started encouraging their students to use computers (if available) for writing. These teachers realized the importance of helping their students become comfortable with technology. One teacher shared a technology lesson she developed for her students: “Integrating technology in the classroom can be a challenge. I know preparing our students for writing in the 21st century is important but the barriers can slow the progress of the integration. Time, money, and equipment present hurdles that have to be overcome. As teachers we will need to think outside the box and create writing lessons that will improve the academic realm of writing as well as learning technology. The computer presents the most obvious choice for lessons. I developed a lesson that looked at email etiquette and then had students respond to a teacher generated office memo email. Students had to access the email account, read the memo, and then reply to the memo using the etiquette rules we had discussed. For many, this was a first experience using email. I liked the lesson and thought it was very worthwhile. The students were engaged in learning at each step.”

The video on grammar instruction offered more effective ways to teach the conventions of writing than using worksheets. Research has shown that teaching grammar as an isolated skill is not effective. One of the workshop participants described how she pinpointed a skill her students needed and the activity she used to address that skill: “We had written a few simple writings and I noticed that capitalization was an issue for some. So, I thought this is the perfect time to try out one of the activities in Workshop 5. We started the class by defining common and proper nouns. Then, I found two short writings and asked the students to highlight all the words that were capitalized in the first. Next, we discussed why

those words were capitalized, which brought the rules of capitalization into the discussion. When we were finished with the first example, I asked them to do the same to the second example and then work in their table groups to discuss why each highlighted word was capitalized. As new examples of proper nouns surfaced questions were asked and classroom discussion took place regarding the rule. Common examples were used as well as less common, such as words in titles, seasons of the year, directions, etc. I thought it was a very different way to present a writing lesson and it moved very quickly. Sure beats the drill and kill of worksheets.”

The ABLE teachers who took part in this training tried out new activities in their classrooms and reflected on those activities with the other teachers. All of the participants were pleased with the results. Could you follow their lead and try out a new writing activity and reflect on it with a colleague? If you would like to watch the “Developing Writers” videos and see the support materials that accompany them, go to <http://www.learner.org/resources/series194.html>