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Comprehensive Project  
What Do Students Look For In A Prewriting Strategy?

Creating a successful narrative is dependent upon the student's ability to utilize prewriting strategies before they begin writing. Due to a lack of narrative writing in the curriculum, I often see my students struggling to create a fictional narrative due to deciding on what their story will be about. Students want me, as the teacher, to provide them with specific characters and problems to help focus their story. Prewriting strategies are a great way to combat students' reliance on the cossetting of mandated topics. By utilizing these strategies, students can organize their thoughts and draft it into a fully developed story. To understand how to help my students become creative writers, I need to know, from them, which prewriting strategies they find the most helpful. I wondered what criteria students use to help them decide which prewriting strategy works best for them.

This spring semester many states completed the PARCC (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers), which focuses mostly on reading and writing of nonfiction texts. In order to adapt to the PARCC, our state's curriculum is placing the focus on nonfiction and having students use text-based evidence to create their writing. Students are now pulling information directly from a prearranged source rather than conducting open-ended research on their topic. This greatly limits students' creativity. Education professor and former teacher Barb Ruben and Leanne Moll addressed the lack of creative writing instruction in today's classroom. They showed that in many schools, "Teachers nationwide are increasingly pressured to use class time for test preparation in core subjects linked to high-stakes tests" (Ruben & Moll 12). The Common Core State Standards have also drastically changed curriculum by "focusing narrowly on argumentative and research writing, leaving little room for

journaling, poetry, fiction, memoir, and other popular student-Choice Genres” (Ruben & Moll 13).

Students are now missing the opportunity to creatively write based on these types of genres because we are focused solely on upcoming rigorous assessments, instead of what our students really need for future success. Every day I am a witness to the consequences of removing creative writing from instruction. Students want me to tell them specifically what to write about rather using their own creativity to craft a story.

Narrative writing plays an important role in the development of a student writer. In former University of Chicago Professor George Hillocks, Jr.’s book *Narrative Writing: Learning a New Model*, he discusses the importance of narrative writing, and how to approach the genre in the classroom. Students are given the opportunity to “examine the stories of {their} lives” (Hillocks Jr. 1). Narrative instruction needs to be focused on teaching “the strategies that enable writers to generate the kinds of concrete detail that make writing effective” (Hillocks Jr. 9). Based on my students’ writing samples, they are actually quite successful at including different elements of narrative writing: dialogue, figurative language, and imagery. It was in the prewriting stage that all students struggled. Once they decided what their story would be about, they were able to write their story without difficulty. Therefore, I critically analyzed the prewriting part of my instruction in order to help my students with this obstacle.

The prewriting stage is an important aspect of the writing process and therefore should comprise more than its fair share of the actual time spent writing. Educators have previously studied the importance of prewriting and its impact on a student’s final product, but Susan Jones studied how the students actually understood and used the process. She noted that prewriting was where, “Writing moves from being a string of linked ideas whereby each idea triggers the next, to being a text with a rhetorical purpose; writing becomes more than merely telling. Thus, the experience of writing...is a symbiotic

relationship between the generation of ideas and the production of text (Jones).” This article showed me my students needed to play a role determining how they prewrite their story. They must understand the relationship between the ideas they have in their head to the act of writing them down on paper. By finding out what methods work for them, I can revisit the types of strategies I present to my classroom.

Throughout the school year, I provide and then model for my students a variety of techniques and ways to pre-write their essays, but this wasn't always the case. In the beginning of my teaching career I saw that after I merely explained the writing assignment, many students had no idea where to begin. Dr. Kerry P. Holmes, a professor of elementary education at The University of Mississippi, had a student teacher experienced this same problem, so she decided to begin modeling this stage of the process for her students. The importance of modeling is to “demystify the writing experience by exposing the teacher's thoughts and actions as he or she goes through the initial and often difficult stages of selecting a topic, putting first thoughts on paper, drafting, revising, and editing a paper into its final form (Holmes 243).” Now, having learned the benefits of modeling, when we begin any writing piece I create a model text for my students and explain in front of them my writing process. In previous essays and topics, I provided students with the prewriting strategy that I thought was best for the topic. For our current narrative writing assignment, the students were able to choose between two different types of prewriting techniques, decide what criteria they look for in a brainstorming technique, and determine why this type worked for them.

During a narrative writing unit, my seventh grade students had just finished reading a historical fiction novel, *Between Shades of Gray* by Ruta Sepetys. This novel was about a young girl named Lina who was taken from her home in Lithuania during World War II. Soviet leader Joseph Stalin sent her to a labor camp in Siberia because her family was believed to be a threat to the Soviet Union. Throughout this unit, we examined a variety of personal accounts from children about their experience during World

War II and what was happening to their family. We analyzed excerpts from *A Diary of Young Girl* by Anne Frank, *Boy in the Striped Pajamas* by John Boyne, and *Lithuanian by the Laptev Sea: The Siberian Memoirs of Dalia Grinkeviciute*, all of which were told from the perspective of a child or young adult. In narrative writing instruction, it is important to “provide concrete phenomena for students to work with” (Hillocks Jr. 13). Therefore the topic for their narrative writing stemmed from the subject and point of view we had been studying: an event connected to World War II, through the perspective of a child.

My task for my students was: *“You are going to write a narrative set during the time of World War II. Since we have been looking at different texts that are from the perspective of a child & teenager, your story must be from the same perspective. Your story can be about anything that connects to World War II.”* Their problem had to connect to an *“injustice or devastating impact of the war.”* This assignment gave students both freedom as well as a general focus for their short story. For the subject, students needed to incorporate their knowledge from our World War II unit into the story. Regarding perspective, during our readings of *Diary of A Young Girl* and *Boy in the Stripped Pajamas* we had discussed a child’s point of view and what this viewpoint may have missed, not understood, and the unique value added through the eyes of a child.

For the World War II writing piece, I presented students with two different brainstorming techniques that we had used throughout the year. My goal was for the students to determine which aspects of a brainstorming strategy are most useful to them. In order to focus their thinking, I presented them with questions about why they chose that brainstorming strategy and how the strategy helped them create their writing piece. The two strategies I presented were “Clustering” and “WH Questions.” These two strategies are structured drastically different. Where one is free from, the other is more systematized. The book *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers*, which analyzes the teaching of writing and

gives tools for teachers to utilize in their classroom, contrasts the two strategies. Regarding clustering, the author states that, “Unlike formal outline[s] with their restriction system of Roman and Arabic numerals and their need for parallelism, cluster diagrams represent provisional representations of the relationship among topics, subtopics, and supporting evidence” (Lindemann 114). Students are able to see where their thoughts and ideas take them. Their original storyline may have evolved in a different way than originally expected. WH Questions is more of the traditional “outline” because the students answer questions that focus the plot of their story. WH Questions are a form of Heuristics, and “they increase the possibilities for probing a topic thoroughly, and they usually generate provisional questions... {that} should lead students to formulate further questions” (Lindemann 118). By giving them basic “who”, “what”, “when”, “where”, and “how” questions they can focus their short story.

On the first day of the writing assignment, as a class we discussed what we have studied about World War II including: the countries involved, the reasons for the war, the Holocaust, Stalin, Hitler, and other topics. Each student received a handout that outlined the question and expectations for the assignment. Students also received a page that contained both options for the brainstorming guide so they could see both options before deciding which one worked best for them. After reviewing the different techniques as a class, I created examples based on the novel we just read to reiterate to the students how to use these strategies. While students were brainstorming, I kept the examples projected onto the board so the students could refer to them throughout the brainstorming process. My goal was for the students to see a completed example in order to see how both strategies are used, while not providing actual ideas for their story.

These brainstorming strategies have been successful in my classroom in helping students to plan out their writing, but I wanted to discover *how* the students determine which tools are useful for them. By integrating their opinion and the relevance in the writing process, the students will also be vested in

this task. In the article, “Best Practices in Fostering Student Engagement,” the authors provided teachers with concrete ways to improve student engagement. They discussed that the importance and long-term application of lessons is important to the engagement of my students. When teachers “provide choices and they make the curriculum and instruction relevant to adolescents’ experiences, cultures, and long term goals...students see some value in what they are doing in school” (Christenson et al. 1101). My students become engaged in the process and critically analyze how they can use this strategy in the future.

Then, after the students completed the brainstorming activity and their subsequent writing piece, I had the students answer questions to probe their thinking about why and how the brainstorming strategy aided their writing. It is important to create “reflective opportunities in writing classrooms for young writers to explore and rationalize [how] their own behavior might enable them to make strategic choices about their own writing that allows them to maximize the opportunity to both generate ideas and to shape them into written texts” (Jones). The students answered the following questions: “*Which strategy did you choose? Why did you choose this strategy? How did the strategy help you to organize your thoughts?*” These questions required students to think about the strategy and how it connected to the entire writing process. While the students were utilizing the tools, I checked in with a few students and enquired as to how using these tools was helping them to create their stories. Many students told me that they liked being able to choose between the two strategies, rather than being told which one to use. One student even shared that they started working with the clustering strategy and then went to the WH Questions to focus their story. Their initial feedback showed me that my students are indeed able to choose what is just right for them; in the future, I need to provide more options to accommodate all students’ specific needs.

After collecting my data, 60% of my students chose the WH Questions and 40% chose the Clustering strategy to prepare for the writing piece. After looking over their before-writing questions, I saw all students were critically thinking about what they look for in a prewriting strategy. Many students used the phrase, *“it was the easier one.”* Through writing conferences, I asked students what they meant by *“the easier one.”* A student, who chose the clustering strategy, told me that *“easy means that I don’t have to have a specific idea for my story. I can create as many groups as I wanted, and then decide what jumps out at me to make my story.”* Often when students previously encountered the WH Questions brainstorming strategy, they would become frustrated: if they don’t know what they wanted to write about, how can they answer the questions? I was surprised to see that four students had utilized both strategies. One student said, *“I started using the clustering strategy, but it was too hard to think of ideas so I switched to the other strategy. I had no idea what I wanted my story to be about so the WH questions helped me write my story.”* This showed me that some students self-regulated how the brainstorming strategy was helping, or not helping, them with the writing process. Offering different types of brainstorming strategies for students allows them to choose which works best for them.

After the students were finished writing their short story, I had the students complete reflection questions about how the strategies did or did not help them write their story. The strategy may have been successful initially, I forced them to consider if the strategy is something that they would choose again in the future. My goal was to give them a long-term application of the skills that they were practicing in the classroom. The questions were as follows: *“How did the brainstorming strategy help you write your essay? Would you use the strategy in the future? Why or why not? If you were going to write this story again, would you still choose the same strategy to use? Why or why not?”* Students had to reevaluate their writing and determine how (or if) the strategy they chose helped them, and discuss which aspects of the strategy were helpful. I wanted students to reflect if their strategy they believed would help them the most actually did help them.

By reviewing their answers, I saw that all of the students felt that they chose the strategy that was the best choice for their story. For my students who chose the Clustering Strategy they stated that the most useful part of the category was the ability to put many ideas on the page. A student wrote, *“The strategy helped me because I put all my ideas on the page before I decided what I wanted to write about. It was helpful because I didn’t need to know what I wanted to write about before using the brainstorming strategy. My story was better because I could think about all my ideas before writing my story.”* The Clustering students liked the free-writing and open format to pre-write their story, whereas students who chose the WH Question strategy discussed that the specific questions helped them see what to include in their story before they began writing. A student said, *“I hate when I write my story and find out I missed something. The questions helped me know what my story was before I started to write.”* Both students liked that the strategies helped them focus their thoughts before they wrote their story. Each strategy accommodated the students’ specific needs, whether they needed structure or free-form, when writing their essay. After looking at the results I’ve concluded that it is not the characteristics of various strategies that are important, but rather the specific needs of the student.

Initially I hoped to discover which characteristics of prewriting students required in their writing. Now I see that it is not about the strategy, but the individual student. I also found that there was a connection between the student’s personality and the strategy that they chose. My students who chose the WH Questions prefer order both in their writing and in their life, while those who chose the Clustering Strategy are more artistic and free-form. As a teacher, it is essential to know all of my students and their individual needs. Therefore, when presenting a prewriting unit to my students, I must consider who the students are and what they require when I evaluate a prewriting strategy. As an educator, part of my job is to provide for my students based on their individual needs. In the future I will need to address my students’ individual writing needs when preparing assignments. My students are



more engaged if they “have some multiple pathways to competence. Engagement increases in environments where students have some autonomy selecting tasks and methods and play an active role in learning” (Christenson et. al 1101). Throughout this process I focused on how my students were able to take charge of their learning and determine what is best for them. This type of mindset is similar to how Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Donald Murray focuses on writing as an explicit process in his paper, “Teach Writing as a Process Not a Product.” By making my teaching of writing about the process rather than the product, “It is not the job of the teacher to legislate the student’s truth. It is the responsibility of the students to explore his own world with his own world with his own language to discover his own meaning” (Murray 4). Throughout this process I have discovered that I am “teaching a product {my} students can use now and in the future to produce whatever product his subject and his audience demand” (Murray 5). The activities I presented to my students will have a lasting impact on their ability to prewrite and determine criteria they need in a prewriting strategy.

## Works Cited

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