



Bridging the Testing/Teaching Gap

Issues and Challenges

A writing teacher's dream:

You're in your classroom, surveying your thirty-or-so students busily revising their essays. They're working independently except for brief conversations when they gather in twos or threes to make sure a turn of phrase or transition or conclusion they've just added enhances the effectiveness of their essays. You've managed to build time into your schedule to allow three weeks for this project, and you've only stopped students from their writing to introduce some fresh prewriting activities (drawing, perhaps, or interviewing a classmate) and to review the form and function of a counterargument. You've had the luxury to spend time (during the daily hour reserved for writing) conferring with individual students about their drafts. This period is popular with your students, all of whom you've been able to engage—opening their writing to some interesting topics, coaching the hesitant writers via frequent mini-conferences. The sweetly oiled machine of your writers' workshop is humming smoothly.

If you've seen anything like this in real life, you're lucky. This vision of a classroom writing program that provides focused attention to individual writers seems a remote ideal for most of us. Faced with increasing demands to prepare students for high-stakes multiple choice tests and required to implement increasingly prescribed literacy programs (making *individual* instruction almost impossible), many teachers have had to abandon well-established, thematically driven, student-centered writing programs. We teachers have less time to craft instruction around current high-interest topics that motivate students to write. Instead, we feel compelled to prepare students for spontaneous writing in response to impersonal and generic topics, robbing them of opportunities to see the integral link between reading and writing, to develop their writing over multiple drafts, and to practice writing for different purposes. Students simply don't develop as writers.

Meaningful writing instruction has been shortchanged as assessment readiness has taken a lead role in many schools. Day after day of classroom instruction is spent on "drill and

kill” test readiness booklets, force-feeding students, their eyes glazed, with information national or state bodies have deemed important.

The result? Writing programs almost everywhere have suffered. As states have adopted lists of standards and multiple choice tests, meaningful writing instruction has devolved into a series of fragmented assignments driven by testing priorities. Formerly student-centered, meaning-based instructional programs have been replaced by prescriptive textbook series or formulaic writing agendas, leaving little room for students to move in directions of their own interests and find their own voices, and still less room for teachers to branch off into areas of local or contemporary relevance. Such one-size-fits-all approaches to writing have become common in many districts nationwide. As a result of these conditions, we’re already witnessing decreased student interest in writing as well as a diminished ability to use writing as a way to extend and deepen thinking. Students resist writing more than ever and do not have opportunities to practice (or see the value of) developing ideas over time. Test results in many states (both performance measures and standardized test scores) show increasingly lower results in writing.

WHY TEACH ASSESSMENT-BASED WRITING?

Are we advocating a test-free education? Not at all. Writing tests help monitor and improve our teaching, and they’re also a reality for students applying to high schools or colleges, for scholarships, and, of course, for jobs. They’re required components of many courses and of school and district exit exams, and we’re witnessing a renewed emphasis on writing tests as a window into the thinking and problem-solving abilities of students at all ages across the curriculum.

Though they take different forms, writing assessments abound. Curriculum standards in all states identify narrative and expository writing types as priorities for instruction and assessment. These genres are tested in a variety of ways at many different levels. Sometimes the assessments serve as benchmarks to signify whether or not students are on track for meeting graduation or exit requirements. Sometimes they are the gates that permit students to pass to the next level, gain admission to a school, or demonstrate proficiency in a subject to circumvent a required class. In addition to local varieties of writing tests administered by schools, districts, and states, there are large-scale national writing tests. These are generally high-stakes assessments upon which important decisions are based. They’re also used to monitor the writing performance of large groups of students, both in the United States and internationally. The College Board has recently replaced the analogies section of the SAT with a writing sample, and almost all states administer formal writing tests. What all have in common is the expectation that students will respond to a reading selection or series of questions by writing a substantive, coherent, correct essay in a limited amount of time.

We need to prepare students to perform at their highest levels in these situations. And, of course, many skills required on these tests are necessary for more than test-taking. Much writing is done under time constraints. The ability to write succinctly and spontaneously is important for conveying and recording information, communicating effectively, and

demonstrating what the writer has learned or experienced. Writing on demand is a useful lifelong skill.

The dilemma that we as educators face is to know where instruction and assessment meet: that is, what the criteria are for assessments that not only measure student achievement but also enhance and promote real learning. Unfortunately, many tests are poorly designed; they're disconnected from students' lives and from what students learn in the classroom. Further, they fail to provide timely information that teachers or students can use.

Our challenge becomes daunting. How do we, teachers who believe in the power of writing and the attendant search for meaning in young students' lives, preserve a quality instructional program when external demands rob us of the necessary time and focus such a deep program requires? While nothing can replace a flexible, personalized, and process-oriented writing program, we *do* believe that it's possible to continue to implement a quality writing curriculum through a series of comprehensive, custom-designed performance assessments. Our years of curriculum coaching, performance assessment coordination, and teaching have shown us that integrating quality authentic writing tests into a classroom or a grade-level or schoolwide writing program can be powerful. It can drive whole-school reform, teacher collaboration, and student writing improvement in profound ways.

In such a program, students develop versatility, and they progress as writers while at the same time teachers gather data about the effectiveness of their instruction. *Prompted to Write* responds to the challenge writing teachers face by offering lessons that integrate into the current instructional context. These lessons will guide you and your students in a series of activities that develop literacy while engaging students' interest and simultaneously preparing them for on-demand writing tests.

WHAT IS EFFECTIVE WRITING INSTRUCTION?

Many teachers believe that students learn to write effectively by working through stages of the writing process. The purest form of this pedagogical model is Writer's Workshop, where students choose their own topics and move through brainstorming, organizing, drafting, and revising their writing to arrive at a final draft. In this model, the teacher and students develop a classroom culture of shared enthusiasm for writing, creating a safe environment in which to take risks while building respect for everyone's efforts. Teaching comes in the form of mini-lessons, short periods of direct instruction targeting particular aspects of writing reflective of the specific genre, topic, or area with which students are struggling. Student writers share their writing by reading progressive drafts from the "Author's Chair" and getting feedback from classmates about what listeners (and readers) like about the piece and where questions remain. Writer's Workshop builds confidence and commitment in student writers and can yield exceptional student writing. For teachers with much to teach, however, the downside of Writer's Workshop is that writing projects take weeks to complete.

Colleagues from what we consider the opposite end of the continuum believe that practice with one-liner prompts teaches spontaneous writing and prepares students for the large-scale assessments they face in the spring. Repeated practice at spontaneous writing

in isolation doesn't really *teach* writing, of course, though it may help students identify topics on which they write easily, and it may ultimately reduce test anxiety. Absent from this model is any instruction in writing strategies, attention to the stages of the writing process that give students planning time, or techniques for organizing an effective piece of writing. Students come away from these one-liner prompt exercises lacking a sense that writing is an organic process, that it germinates from the seed of an idea, grows, and, with proper nourishment and deft pruning, flourishes. And, of course, one-liners can—in a single tyrannical line—devastate student confidence when their victims are unable to respond to them.

How can we connect both ends of this writing instruction continuum? The response is to give students—via interesting, well-developed, process-oriented prompts—practice at moving through the writing process in the limited amount of time that is the reality in most of our schools. We also must create opportunities for students to build a repertoire of writing strategies and develop the versatility to write for a variety of purposes. To extend and develop their ideas, students need time to think about and talk about their ideas. The prompt-lessons in *Prompted to Write* offer a middle ground, a meeting place if you will, for all of us working to teach meaningful writing in the context of large-scale standards-aligned assessments.

