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"Nobody but a Reader Ever Became a Writer": Integrating Reading and Writing Instruction to Help Adolescents Tell their Stories

Abstract

One of the most powerful methods for helping students tell their stories is to immerse them in the stories of others, helping them emulate what they learn about writer's craft into their own pieces. Both the National Council of Teachers of English (2004, 2016) and the Virginia Department of Education (Robertson, 2017) recommend the integration of reading and writing as best practices for English/language arts instruction. Although this recommendation is well documented, it may not actually reflect the common practices of middle and high school English/language arts teachers. This article explores the implications of a research study on the integrative instructional practices of Virginia middle and high school teachers (Doubet & Southall, 2017). It examines enacted practice in relationship to recommended practice and offers practical suggestions for teachers who wish to weave reading and writing instruction together in a seamless, authentic, and motivating fashion.

Introduction

In his 2004 collection of short stories for adolescents, Richard Peck offers the following advice to teens seeking to tell their own stories: "Nobody but a reader ever became a writer" (p.171). This admonishment opens, closes, and recurs repeatedly throughout Peck's "Five Helpful Hints" for would-be teen writers. His assertion carries considerable importance for middle and high school English teachers: If we want our students to craft their own powerful stories, we must immerse them in the study of other people's stories, both real and fictional, always modeling the principle, "Reading is the inhale and writing is the exhale" (Miller, 2009).

Recommendations from National and State Experts

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) agrees with these assertions, describing reading and writing as intricately linked elements of a symbiotic relationship:

> Reading supports writing development and writing supports reading development. For example, through reading readers learn the power of a strong introduction and eventually use such knowledge as they write their own pieces. Conversely, writing develops awareness of the structures of language, the organization of text, and spelling patterns which in turn contributes to reading proficiency (NCTE, 2004).

When students interact with text as a reader *and* as a writer, with teacher support and transparent integration, they develop skills that transfer from reading to writing and

vice versa, as well as transcend the English/ Language Arts classroom, resulting in literacy cognition that is essential in daily life.

So essential are the impacts of literacy integration that NCTE's 2016 Position Statement featured the assertion, "Reading and Writing are Related," among its ten major organizational headings. This section details the interconnectedness of reading and writing and their processes, as well as what this interconnectedness means for classroom teachers. In order to become skilled at their desired process, writers must read, and readers need to write. NCTE advocates that "Writers must learn how texts are structured, because eventually they have to compose in different genres, and that knowledge of structure helps them to predict and make sense of the sections and sequencing of the texts they read" (NCTE, 2016). Teachers are advised to have "frequent conversations about the connections between what we read and what we write…. These connections will sometimes be about the structure and craft of the writing itself, and sometimes about thematic and content connections" (NCTE, 2016). NCTE advises that teachers understand and teach a variety of concepts and strategies: how writers read, the common traits of reading and writing processes, varied audiences, text structure, and the use of mentor texts in a writer's craft (NCTE, 2016). Teachers must teach reading and writing as linked processes.

The emphasis on the integration of reading and writing extends from the national level to the state level. The annual Virginia Association of Teachers of English (VATE) "State of the State" address conveyed a strikingly similar message. This Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) presentation provided instructional suggestions for developing successful students in Virginia's classrooms. The visual image of this process depicted reading, writing, research, and communication as strands of one strong rope, advocating for their "seamless integration." The specific VDOE recommendations included the use of text-based vocabulary instruction, reading and writing multiple genres, using mentor texts, employing writing conferences and portfolios, and incorporating writing connected to "every lesson" (Robertson, 2017). Clearly, Virginia's instructional leaders in English/Language Arts echo the advice of national instructional experts, presenting reading and writing as inextricable processes in Virginia's classrooms.

A Research Study on Teachers' Reading and Writing Integration

In an effort to determine how often these recommended practices are enacted, we conducted a research study examining the perspective and practices of teachers of grades 6-12 English/Language Arts (Doubet & Southall, 2017). The study surveyed fifty-five teachers, the vast majority of whom were Virginia teachers, prior to a three-hour professional development session on reading and writing integration. As teachers hailed from different schools and school systems, survey questions were broad to account for varying backgrounds and experiences. In turn, data analysis and discussion of findings revolved around 1) teachers' statements about literacy instruction and 2) the number of examples teachers provided of putting these beliefs into action. In the broadest terms, teachers' responses to the pre-intervention survey earned them the distinction of having either an *integrated* approach or a *disconnected* approach to literacy instruction.

Entering the Study

Integrated literacy practices. Eighteen of the teachers surveyed arrived at the training with a previously established view of language arts instruction as connected and integrated. These teachers professed a belief in blending reading and writing instruction: "Students see themselves as writers, not students who are asked to write" (Participant 235). Notably, these teachers detailed specific integrative instructional examples, such as a fluid concept of mentor texts in which "some are predetermined and some just pop up from anywhere" (Participant 217), and reading nonfiction as a tool to support students' nonfiction writing skills. They also provided specific examples of integrating genre in both reading and writing instruction, including "using a variety of student examples to model writing, including my own writing" (Participant 73). Teachers credited their beliefs and practices regarding an integrated view of literacy instruction to either previous staff development opportunities or to the influence of mentor teachers. They also articulated fluid, transferrable plans for continuing their integrative practices: "Reading and writing [instruction]… can be used interchangeably, i.e., you can read a text, use it as a model for writing, and then analyze it" (Participant 73).

Disconnected literacy practices. The majority (N=37) of the teachers surveyed arrived at the professional development session with a *disconnected* view of language arts pedagogy, citing no examples of integrated instruction. Eight of these 37 teachers believed that reading/literature and writing instruction should be connected in authentic ways; however, these participants admitted they were not comfortable or confident enough to weave this integration successfully in their practice: "I understand that they should not be separate from each other. I struggle, however, with teaching them simultaneously" (Participant 47).

Further, though 11 of these 37 teachers claimed they were integrating reading and writing instruction, their described pedagogies revealed a shallow interpretation of what it means to integrate literacy instruction: "After reading a selected piece of literature, the writing component allows the student to formulate, synthesize, and analyze the major themes in the literature works" (Participant 81). This response demonstrates the traditional view that "integration" refers merely to literary analysis.

Eighteen of these 37 educators reported teaching reading/literature and writing as separate, disconnected instructional units and failed to discuss any reading and writing

integration: "I've noticed that I haven't spent as much time on dedicated writing instruction as I would like to. It's also a lot harder to teach writing and make sure it isn't in isolation but that it is connected to both my lessons and units...Actually getting into the classroom and trying to make sure that I am not teaching skills in isolation" (Participant 324).

The Intervention

Anticipating such reactions, our study sought to immerse teachers in integrated reading and writing processes. The intervention was designed around the realization that teachers must first adopt a *belief system* that supports reading/writing integration if they are to invest effort in developing methods of teaching reading and writing in an interactive fashion. Said differently, a change in *philosophy* is what drives substantive and sustained changes in practice (Camburn & Han 2015; Fullan, 2007). That means teachers must experience, first hand, the power of "inhaling" text and "exhaling" their own related experiences through writing. Our professional development session was modeled accordingly, featuring activities that were themselves integrative in nature. The *modeling* of integrative practices was vital, as "modeling has been found to be a highly effective way to introduce a new concept and help teachers understand a new practice" (Gulamhussein, 2013, p. 3). In other words, if teachers participate in strategies that merge reading and writing instruction, they are more likely to believe in the efficacy of those practices and carry them into their own instruction. Teachers

were asked to read others' stories and respond by writing their own stories in small "chunks" throughout the training.

Accordingly, our research engaged participants in a three-hour training on techniques for successfully integrating literacy instruction, as well as the rationale for using such strategies. We modeled integrative literacy techniques drawn from the work of Beers (2003), Gallagher (2011), and Spandel (2012), engaging participants in close reading of texts for both meaning and writer's craft, and then asking them to weave the techniques found in those texts into their own original pieces of writing. Teachers used Gary Soto's poem "Oranges" as a mentor text for creating their own free-verse childhood memory poems laden with imagery (Gallagher, 2011). They analyzed several different versions of Snow White (print and non-print) to reformulate the story into a unique piece in a genre of their choosing (Beers, 2003). Teachers examined word choice in various mentor texts as a catalyst for revising word choice in their own writing (Spandel, 2012), focusing on one of the pieces they had created during the training.

Woven throughout the professional development experience was time for reflecting on 1) how each technique could transfer to participants' teaching practices, 2) ideas for implementing techniques in their own classrooms, and 3) discussion of the benefits and cautions of each. Pulling from their own experiences in the workshop, participants described what

made each strategy personally appealing and brainstormed adaptations designed to elicit similar responses from students.

Exiting the Study

At the conclusion of the study, teachers who had adopted integrated literacy practices were energized by the way students responded. Twenty-seven teachers completed the follow-up survey that was distributed four months following the professional development experience. These teachers reported incorporating a wide range of integrative practices in their instruction of reading and writing and discussed the pedagogical impact of the professional development experience. Those twenty-seven responses fell into the following subcategories: adopters, adapters, and resisters.

Adopters. Eleven teachers emerged as adopters, indicating significant paradigm shifts in their instructional metacognition and practices. These educators described their classrooms as significantly changed: "Literature is writing and all reading and writing are connected. It is useful for students to read and comment on the author's style and how it works for them and how it does not" (Participant 323). One teacher stated that her students had "...thought about themselves more as writers and read with a writer's point of view to see what the authors wanted to reveal or have them consider" (250). These teachers also commented on increased student engagement and agency, stating that students "not only seem to benefit from deeper understanding of

these concepts when reading and writing are combined, but they even seem to enjoy the work more and participate more enthusiastically than they often do when we focus on a single concept at a time" (380). Participant 245's comments summarize the instructional power that reading/writing integration possesses:

Students need to start experiencing higher-order thinking and more in-depth analysis, and for that they need models. To analyze a story, they need to look at the writing and explore the depth of their understanding through their own writing and communication. To complete a writer's workshop and increase the complexity in structure and ideas of their writing, they need to examine articles and literature. They're co-dependent, just like hunters and Bass Pro, or teachers and Pinterest.

These teachers' responses indicated that changes in practice extended beyond simply shifting to new strategies; rather, their emerging practices synthesized the training's modeling into everyday thinking and practice.

Adapters and Resistors. The remaining sixteen teachers may have implemented some isolated integrative strategies, but they failed to demonstrate philosophical change in their post-study responses. Twelve of these participants emerged as "adapters," claiming to have made superficial changes to their practices. These teachers' responses reflected inconsistencies in implementation, and lacked depth of reflection. They cited

specific strategies they had implemented, such as "...a text reformulation in which student picked a tale to retell in a different medium..." (Participant 29), but articulated little substantive change in practice or beliefs: "I have made more of an effort to find resources this year that will allow me to expand my units by combining writing and literature assignments...." (Participant 42).

Most notable of these sixteen teachers were the four "resistor" teachers who discussed the integration of reading and writing as important to student success, but saw little connection between that ideal and their own classroom practice: "In my opinion, students who are good readers, and who read at their own discretion are better writers.... Some students find difficulty making connections between what they are reading and what they are writing...." (Participant 90). This response demonstrates the belief that the teacher's instructional practices have less to do with integration than do students' natural proclivities. Resistor teachers also discussed pressures unrelated to classroom instruction. For example, Participant 366 discussed school politics as well as institutional influences (e.g., state testing and doubts about the quality of the feeder elementary school's literacy program).

Strategies to Foster the Integration of Reading and Writing Instruction

So, what practices might help an adapter – or even a resistor - to become an adapter? What methodologies encourage and, in turn, indicate an authentic integration of reading and writing? What can teachers do to encourage their students to regard reading as the "inhale" and writing as the "exhale"? The following strategies - utilized in our research training as well as in the classrooms of adopter-teachers – offer guidance in helping middle and high school students gain the confidence and inspiration needed to fuel their own storytelling.

Text Reformulation. As a first step, teachers can help students transform the work of writers they admire into "writing" of their own. By reformulating texts (Beers 2003) that speak to them, students can capture a text's essence while "designing" their own unique written creations. Teachers can ask students to transform a poem into to a letter, or to convert a scene from a short story into a piece of headline news. Teachers can also harness the power of technology by encouraging students to use digital design tools such as iMovie Trailer or Canva (https://www.canva.com) to reformulate a text into multimodal "retellings." As students recognize the relationship between powerful writers' techniques and their own, they begin to gain confidence in and ownership of the writing process.

Brief Mentor Texts. Exploring mentor texts by authors who chronicle adolescent experiences allow middle and high school students to connect with texts that mirror their own triumphs and struggles. To begin, teachers can immerse students in accessible stories by authors such as Sandra Cisneros, Thanhha Lai, Gary Soto, and Jacqueline Woodson. Such free-verse memoirs from multiple cultures and perspectives offer a welcoming entry point for students. After reading such texts, students can use similar, accessible text structures to capture their own personal moments and experiences.

Complex Mentor Texts. As students gain confidence, they can venture into exploring and emulating more complex texts. From classics (e.g., Dickens, Wordsworth, O'Connor) to contemporary pieces by award winning young storytellers (e.g., *The Best Teen Writing...* series by Scholastic), lengthier, more dense texts provide a "next step" in immersing students in the writing of experts. Students can use Dickens' powerful novel openings, Wordsworth's stunning word choice, or O'Connor's gripping character sketches as models for the construction of their own. In other words, they can evaluate work of the masters in terms of how it compels them, as readers, to write. Here, too, technology can play a role. For example, "The Moth" storytelling podcast (https://themoth.org/podcast) offers models of masterful – albeit amateur – storytelling in a modern interpretation of the oral tradition. As students listen, they can generate their own criteria for quality storytelling and use that list as a springboard for writing their own memoirs.

Peer Review and Editing. Reading and writing are community practices. Writing is meant to be read and shared. This holds as true for *student* writing as it does for the writing of seasoned experts. For writing to fulfill this authentic role, its audience must extend beyond that of the teacher. At the same time, adolescents need guidance and practice in how to respond to one another's work. Asking students to share their work and respond to others' work is best launched at the classroom level, where teachers can survey, respond to, and/or "approve" or "publish" student comments via sites such as www.Kidblog.org and http://Padlet.com, or other "contained" forums. Careful teacher modeling of feedback plays a vital role in this process, as does classroom evaluation of others' "evaluations," such as online comments and reviews (Carbaugh & Doubet, 2016). Once students become skilled in the process of giving, receiving, and incorporating feedback, they can publish and share their writing with a larger audience via personal blogs such as WordPress or LiveJournal. When students publish their writing – either for their classmates or for a larger audience – and read and respond to the writing generated by their peers, the line between reading and writing begins to blur. "Writers" are no longer inaccessible and disconnected from real life; rather, "writers" are the students themselves, each one an important voice in their writing community.

"The Light" in our Classrooms

As Richard Peck (2004) asserts, "...we write by the light of every story we read. Reading other people's stories shows you the way to your own" (p.171-172). Students' stories naturally include their own narratives, but they also include narratives constructed about people who influence their lives, insights they provide into topics of interest, and assertions they make about issues that are important to them. Therefore, all

student writing - narrative fiction, narrative nonfiction, informational, persuasive, etc. – should be preceded by investigations into the masterful work of other writers. Those texts will provide the "light" by which students can write their own pieces.

In the same fashion, teachers who adopt integrated literacy practices teach "by the light" of their own successes. As one teacher explained, "Literature and writing are both expressions of the human condition. Literature is someone else's expression and writing is our own" (Participant 102). Teachers who actively and consistently practice reading and writing integration know that "Separation of lit [sic] and writing instruction would make each incomplete and artificial. Readers should be and think like writers and vice versa" (Participant 210). Students will flourish as complex consumers and producers of language, as "...using the two [reading and writing] together is a win-win. Reading to write gives purpose and a critical eye; writing using mentor texts gives student solid examples and pushes them to try new techniques" (Participant 385). Teachers are encouraged in their teaching efforts by students' growth and positive responses in terms of their engagement and their perceptions of their own self-efficacy. Teachers who integrate reading and writing instruction are inspired by the development of their students as readers who write.

Teachers must be readers and writers themselves if they are to experience success in integrated instructional practices

(Gallagher, 2011). When teachers allow students to witness their reading and writing processes - the excitement of a new text, the discussion of an author's choices and ideas, the moments of inspiration, the stops and starts, and the constant revision of their own writing - they provide students with glimpses into the impact of a powerful read, the creative "mess" of story-construction, and the discovery of the reality that visceral reaction to a text or true growth in writing will likely not magically "appear" with the first novel opened or in a first attempted draft. In that sense, Peck's reasoning holds true for both teachers and students: "Nobody but a reader ever became a writer," and nobody but a reader/writer ever became a powerful teacher of reading and writing.

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