Alex Shubert

Developing Writing Skills in Middle School Science

At the beginning of the year, our assistant superintendent said, “Hey, we’re going to develop these writing modules and teaching tasks, and put them together and teach them to the kids. The benefit is that they’ll address the Common Core Standards and the writing tied to it.” Well, I’d heard the Common Core was coming, but it hadn’t really impacted me yet. I teach a lab class with a research paper, though, so it wasn’t really a big stretch for me to say, “Sure, I can try to develop a writing module.”

Thinking back, it was very overwhelming. As a science teacher, I’ve had no formal training in how to teach the writing process. I can spot grammar mistakes and spelling errors no problem, but as far as the structure of a paper, I don’t have a solid enough background for those teaching strategies. But the way the tasks are written, you can just plug and play with different topics. And a lot of people were willing to help. Another seventh-grade science teacher and I partnered to develop two modules, and the reading specialist was involved in our planning. I also co-taught one of the modules with her, and that went well. I was surprised that the students weren’t as resistant to writing as I thought they might be.

As a result of this involvement, I’ve tried new ways of teaching. For example, today I tried a strategy I’ve never done before—the Socratic seminar—and it was great. It helped to really bring out ideas, and maybe even expose some misunderstandings. So that was a good way to get feedback as to whether the students are really getting it, and also help prep them to write. This is my second time through the current module; I didn’t have to do it again, but once you have had the chance you really want to fix the mistakes and improve it. The first time went well, but this time is going very smoothly; I’m really pleased with it.

Yes, there’s some more time involved, but if the pros outweigh the cons, you adjust and adapt to streamline other areas of your teaching. And it kind of goes in bursts: the prep work is done up front, and once the prep work’s done it runs pretty smoothly. Then there are certain points, like in two weeks I’ll collect their rough drafts, and then I’ll be under the gun to really read those well and return them within a day or two. That’s a challenge. But I’ve come to recognize that there’s a definite need for this kind of writing instruction somewhere in the curriculum.

Whether that falls on us or the English teachers, I’m not quite sure I know the answer. It depends on how your school’s set up. But I think if you can go across the curriculum that’s great. Because you want it to be consistent, like from K through 12 you want it to have some progression. We’ll figure it out. But after field testing it I would recommend this approach.

My absolute biggest suggestions for successfully creating and implementing a module are: To work with someone else to share the load and bounce ideas off of; to look at model work—a sample module, sample student work—to make sure you choose a topic that is relevant or interesting to students within the confines of your standards and core content; and to find appropriate, age-level resources for the students.

Thinking back, it was very overwhelming. As a science teacher, I’ve had no formal training in how to teach the writing process. I can spot grammar mistakes and spelling errors no problem, but as far as the structure of a paper, I don’t have a solid enough background for those teaching strategies. But the way the tasks are written, you can just plug and play with different topics. And a lot of people were willing to help. Another seventh-grade science teacher and I partnered to develop two modules, and the reading specialist was involved in our planning. I also co-taught one of the modules with her, and that went well. I was surprised that the students weren’t as resistant to writing as I thought they might be.

As a result of this involvement, I’ve tried new ways of teaching. For example, today I tried a strategy I’ve never done before—the Socratic seminar—and it was great. It helped to really bring out ideas, and maybe even expose some misunderstandings. So that was a good way to get feedback as to whether the students are really getting it, and also help prep them to write. This is my second time through the current module; I didn’t have to do it again, but once you have had the chance you really want to fix the mistakes and improve it. The first time went well, but this time is going very smoothly; I’m really pleased with it.