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Learning to write and writing to learn

Rijlaarsdam, G.; Braaksma, M.; Janssen, T.; Groenendijk, T.; Toorenaar, A.

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Learning to write and writing to learn

Writing is a vital skill for school, life, and personal development. Gert Rijlaarsdam, Martine Braaksma, Tanja Janssen, Talita Groenendijk, and Anne Toorenaar **have used the evidence from writing process studies to design and test writing interventions**

NO PUPIL CAN BE SUCCESSFUL AT SCHOOL without writing. As they learn to write they learn to express their feelings and thoughts, and share them with others. They also learn how to persuade readers of their viewpoint, and how to move others through a story. In addition, pupils discover how to use writing as a learning tool, a way to grasp complex subject matter. Across various subjects pupils write essays, summaries, and syntheses of sources. In short, writing is omnipresent. Although there is no specific examination it is a skill that much depends on, in school and indeed in later life.

> 66 **Writing is not just a way of communicating or displaying what has been learned. It can also be a tool for acquiring content knowledge, developing understanding, and improving thinking skills.** 99

Since the 1970s there has been a wealth of research into writing processes and effective interventions or curricula to stimulate writing. Handbooks, reviews, and meta-analyses provide accessible summaries of research findings. This is not to say that we now know all there is to know about writing. Rather, we know better what we do not yet know. We also know more about writing in two languages. Many non-Anglophone speakers must now communicate in at least two languages: the language of schooling and a version of global English.

What we now know about writing processes

Most research on how people write, on differences between writers, and how these differences are related to the quality of the final text, uses a think-aloud method. That is, researchers gain an insight into the writing process by having pupils think aloud while writing a text. This method has provided rich data.

Recently, computer key logging has also been used. This is specialist software that records all keystrokes, mouse movements, pauses, and revisions during writing. Equipment to follow the eye movements of writers during writing is also now used by some researchers.

This is what we have learned from studies of writing processes thus far:

1. Weak writers as well as strong writers make use of the same cognitive activities; reading sources, generating ideas, organising ideas, transforming ideas into a text, re-reading and evaluating parts of the text already written, and making revisions. However, stronger writers tend to vary activities more than weak writers. Strong writers alternate frequently between "thinking" and "production", while weak writers are primarily occupied with "production". To put it bluntly; weak writers are immersed in producing text, stronger writers oversee and supervise their text production.

2. Weak writers do not vary their approach between writing tasks; each writing task is tackled in the same way. Strong writers are more adaptive; they invest in thinking about the task at hand, and adapt their writing process to that particular task.

3. Weak writers tend to view a text as a series of words, while stronger writers tend to view a text as a means of communication.

These trends, along with a good insight into the variation of writing processes in different age groups, have helped us to design effective interventions.

What we now know about learning to write

One of the most effective writing interventions is strategy teaching. This aims to teach children how to plan, to revise, to edit, and to regulate the writing process. Strategy teaching consists of the teacher modelling, and then pupils applying the strategy they have observed with assistance, and working towards independent use of the strategy. Well-structured collaboration between pupils is another effective technique.

Observation

From studying strategy teaching, we know that the first phase, modelling, contributes most to the effect. Therefore, our research has focused on how to design effective learning arrangements for observation, the learning activity stimulated by modelling. Observation is a very strong learning strategy. It consists of:

- Observing one or two peer writers (on video), thinking aloud when performing a writing strategy (planning, revising, reading and analysing documents)
- Evaluating which peer did best or less well ("which of the writers did best/less well?")
- Elaborating the evaluation (answering the question "why did you decide that this pupil did best/less well?")

Observation as the one and only learning strategy proved to be effective for various age groups, texts, and writing strategies: argumentative texts, poetry, sentence combining, revision, synthesis texts, document analysis for writing, etc. Young people from the age of 15 to 22 increased their writing skills by observing videos – peers at work – instead of practising the task themselves. This is learning to write without writing.

Another effective observation activity in teaching writing is observing readers. For instance, pupils can write instructions of how to conduct a simple science experiment. They are then shown a video of someone reading a similar manual and working through the experiment. From the reader's think-aloud

the writers learn how people respond while reading a manual, and what kind of information they need. All kinds of hesitations and errors from the reader serve as input for learning. Having seen these videos writers are very keen to revise their original manuals, and their revisions are generally very effective. Moreover, writers gain an awareness of the text genre, and are able to transfer this experience to other writing tasks.

Teaching arrangements for learning to write from readers can take many forms. For example, pupils may first get a task such as writing a letter to someone (eg, a firm, the head teacher). They then observe a discussion between some of their peers who have to select one or two of the letters while role playing the board of the firm or the head teacher. The pupils then list the arguments used in the discussion, and then re-write their letters. Here again, teachers experience reveals that pupils are very eager to re-write because they feel that they have learnt much that can be applied.

What we now know about writing-to-learn

Writing is not just a way of communicating or displaying what has been learned. It can also be a tool for acquiring content knowledge, developing understanding, and improving thinking skills. This "learning through writing" can be applied in different subject areas – ranging from science to literature, and from biology to history – and at various educational levels (primary, secondary and tertiary education).

From writing-to-learn studies we know that:

1. Longer writing assignments are less effective than shorter ones. This might be due to motivational problems, especially in poor writers.
2. During writing pupils should be encouraged to reflect on their understanding of the topic of writing, their affective or motivational responses to the topic, and on what they are learning.
3. Pupils must be stimulated to use everyday language (instead of scientific language), to re-represent key concepts in different wording, and to write for a real audience.

What we know

- Young writers vary in the way they use writing strategies.
- Young writers vary in the way they adapt their strategies to new tasks.
- Pupils can learn to write texts and apply strategies when observing and evaluating other pupils' writing processes (videos).
- Pupils can learn to write from observing readers (on video) who try to understand or who evaluate texts.

About the authors

Gert Rijlaarsdam, Martine Braaksma, Tanja Janssen, Talita Groenendijk, Anne Toorenaar work at the Research Institute of Child Development and Education, University of Amsterdam, in the Research Team in Language, Literature & Arts Education. www.rtle.nl.

Further reading/resources

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