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At Last! The Pieces Fit!

BY JULIA REYNOLDS

Good teaching is inseparable from good assessing.—Grant Wiggins

Teaching children to write is a challenging task that can take many forms, but it always has the same goal—to help students express themselves clearly through written language. Yet, what has been the thread, or several threads, that have remained consistent over time? Although they may assume other names, six traits of writing—ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions—have been consistent lenses for teaching writing. It is essential that these elements of good writing become the foundation for writing instruction so that children learn the important criteria for good writing.

The Past

Writing instruction in America is as old as the nation itself. Children have scrawled letters on chalkboard tablets for centuries. Yet, what was defined as writing varied over time, depending on the focus and the philosophy. The amazing part is that certain parts of writing instruction that were relevant so long ago remain relevant today.

Lucille Schultz (1999) traces the history of writing instruction in the nineteenth-century by describing lessons that teachers taught children. Writing instruction in the early part of the century consisted of children being taught formal grammar. Children were taught to name parts of speech and their functions. “Missing from this instruction was any form of interactive learning; students were rewarded not for problem-solving or for original thinking but for accurate memory” (Schultz, 2001, p. 13). Teaching the conventions of writing by memorizing grammatical concepts and parts of speech was the focus.

Composition books of the time contained lessons to teach children how to write their ideas. This consisted of giving children pictures of objects or scenes, asking them to brainstorm ideas and then to write descriptions of what was happening. “Students could

learn to write by writing ... beginning with mental gymnastics. [The teacher] directs students to follow a seven-step ‘study of the subject’ before taking up the pen to record a single idea” (Schultz, 2001, p. 46). This prewriting activity, dating back to the late 1840s, focused on having students clarify their ideas before starting to write. Writing down ideas was the pinnacle starting point for a child’s writing.

Bronson Alcott, father of Louisa May Alcott, helped children at his school learn to develop voice by writing in journals. “Given Alcott’s goal of teaching self-knowledge, it is not surprising that he praised students for recording their personal thoughts and feelings; encouraged them to do so when they weren’t; and asked them not to write like automatons” (Schultz, 2001, p. 51). Ironically, voice, now seen as an abstract trait, was taught to children in 1835!

Interesting examples from the nineteenth century about teaching word choice in writing were prevalent in Schultz’s research. Often, children were shown an ordinary object such as a piece of glass, an apple, or a piece of leather and asked to describe it with as many descriptive words as possible. This type of activity helped the children to look in various ways at an

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object and build vocabulary by considering various word choices. The focus then shifted to finding "... a way for students to write about concrete objects and, in some cases, to make the transition to writing firsthand accounts of their own experiences" (Schultz, 2001, pp. 73-74). This teaching for transfer method asks students to see isolated exercises in relation to their own writing and apply some of the ideas.

Trait instruction existed throughout the country in the 1800s, although it was not called that. Children learned to brainstorm ideas before writing, put voice in their writing by being themselves, use interesting word choices to describe events, and apply rules of conventions to their writing. So, how did these foundational principles of writing instruction get lost when I was taught to teach writing and when I actually had my own classroom of students?

My Search

"But I like it the way it is."

"What am I supposed to change?"

"I fixed the spelling."

These comments were typical of what I heard from my high school English students when I asked them to revise their writing. It did not matter that I wrote "Tell me more" across several points on their rough drafts. They lacked knowledge of how to revise, and I lacked knowledge of how to help them to revise.

When I taught high school, I always struggled with teaching writing to my students, not because I did not know about personal narratives, persuasive techniques, or logical transitions. The problem I continually faced was how to convey what I knew to my students so that it would sink in and they would actually start using what I taught them in their own writing. Sure, I was good at using my green pen (brain-friendly color) when correcting grammar, spelling, and punctuation, but what could I really say to my students about improving the content of their writing—the parts that really mattered?

Lucy Calkins reflects on her own experience as a teacher of writing when she says, "Teaching writing is a matter of faith. We demonstrate that faith when we listen well, when we refer to our students as writers,

when we expect them to love writing and to pour their heart and soul into it" (Calkins, 1994, p. 17). So, why was I struggling to find this faith? I could pick out areas to focus on for revision and I saw myself as a writer, but I lacked the language to communicate this to my students. If I was lost, how could I help them?

Ironically, I had left classroom teaching and became a curriculum coordinator before I discovered missing pieces to this puzzle. The district in which I worked was searching for a writing program that would help teachers with writing instruction that aligned with the *Michigan Curriculum Framework* and the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP). It was critical to find something that was not totally new, because teachers had bounced back and forth between programs for many years. Because the overall goal was to find something that would impact student writing, we searched for a program that would accomplish that.

By chance, someone I knew attended a session on six traits of writing at a conference. She came back with excitement and enthusiasm unlike any I had seen in a long time. She had recorded information about a Web site for the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL). We were off searching! On the Web site, we found a list of workshops on 6+1 Trait™ Writing (the term NWREL uses), and I enrolled in a three-day advanced session in Newark, New Jersey. I thought I could bypass the basic training, since I had looked at many Web sites on Six Traits. I did not know that a whole new world was about to open up to me.

My Newark trainer was Ruth Culham, a leading expert on Six Traits. Ruth spent three days showing teachers how to teach to the traits. We practiced scoring papers using an analytical rubric for each trait, designing lesson plans using picture books, and watching videos of Six Traits in practice. The people in the workshop amazed me—some were from New Jersey, but others were from Iowa, Georgia, New York, West Virginia, and even American schools in South Africa and Egypt. Six Traits had swept the world! I heard story after story about how Six Traits instruction helped to improve children's writing. Learning about Six

Traits in more depth helped me see how it could focus writing instruction in my district.

I returned with a new energy about writing instruction. The curriculum writing team worked diligently at weaving Six Traits into the district writing curriculum. We spent hours researching what other states were doing with writing and looking over their states' curriculums to see if the traits were reflected in their work. Everything was coming together. I set up summer workshops for district teachers to learn about Six Traits. The workshops ran for two full days, with the first day devoted to defining each trait, and the second day devoted to learning instructional strategies.

We showed many student examples and provided practical and useful ideas. The workshops were consistently full, and teachers loved

the information that they could fit so logically into their approaches to writing instruction. The important thing stressed was that Six Traits does NOT replace a writing program. It is a philosophy that gives focus to the current writing instruction. Teachers took solace in this, since they feared that this would be something new forced upon them.

Six Traits is typically an assessment model, but it can be used as the basis for writing instruction. Usually, looking at assessment results can help teachers make informed instructional decisions for children. Instead, I like to use Six Traits as the focus for instruction, not a by-product. Deciding on key criteria for assessment has also determined key criteria for instruction. What began with teachers looking at writing assessments and looking for qualities of good writing has resulted in a powerful tool for instruction.

History

The six traits of writing were not invented by someone. "They are an inherent part of what makes writing work, and they have been around virtually as long as writing itself" (Spandel, 2001, p.40). A single person did not sit down and figure them out. The six traits were uncovered by teachers looking at student writing to see what consistently made a piece stand out.

Paul Diederich (1974), did initial work when concern was raised in the 1970's about the grading of college entrance examination essays. Some thought that evaluators of the essays were not qualified to assess and that there were no consistent guidelines for scoring the essays. Diederich gathered more than 600 essays from three colleges and asked teachers, writers, editors, business people, and others to look at samples of student writing and rank the writing from low to medium to high. Then, these evaluators identified qualities that contributed or detracted from the writing. From this, five traits emerged: ideas, mechanics, organization and analysis, wording and phrasing, and flavor. Ideas and organization were considered more important traits and were given more weight. A method for assessing writing and defining criteria came from this study.

In 1983 and 1984, a group of teachers in Beaverton, Oregon, attempted to replicate Diederich's work. They analyzed student writing in grades 3-12 to find common ground in the writing. They were tired of using their state writing assessments for information about student writing. Because they wanted a better system, they spent three weeks reading student papers in each of these grade levels, ranking them like Diederich, from low to medium to high. They also wrote down their reasons for assigning each rank. After several weeks, what is now known as the Six Trait assessment came from this study (Spandel, 2001).

Also in 1984, teachers from Ann Arbor, Michigan, public schools and faculty from the University of Michigan did a similar study and developed a writing instruction and assessment guide for teachers. The intent of the study was to closely align what was being taught to what was being tested. Teachers wanted a local writing assessment that could inform instruction, instead of relying on large-scale testing from the state. They read more than 1,000 student papers, looking for criteria that stood out consistently in strong pieces of writing. They decided on the criteria of Authenticity/Voice/Engagement, Focus/Organization/Development, and Sentence Mechanics/Language (Stock & Robinson, 1987).

Six Traits does NOT replace a writing program. It is a philosophy that gives focus to the current writing instruction

The overall theme of all three studies was to define what is valued in writing and then evaluate writing with those factors in mind. The impressive piece is that people across the country discovered definite criteria for good writing on their own, with no influence from each other, and that these key elements for assessment could also become key elements of writing instruction. This demonstrated that teachers share common values about what is important in writing and that writing instruction should reflect that vision.

Definitions of Six traits

Which traits do the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, Great Source Education Group, school districts across the nation, and states like Oregon and Arizona embrace to assess for on their state writing assessments? They are:

Ideas: clarity, detail, original thinking, and textual interest

Organization: internal structure, a captivating lead, logical sequencing, and a sense of resolution

Voice: liveliness, passion, energy, awareness of audience, involvement in the topic, and capability to elicit a strong response from the reader;

Word Choice: accuracy, precision, phrasing, originality, a love of words, and sensitivity to the reader's understanding;

Sentence Fluency: rhythm, grace, smooth sentence structure, readability, variety, and logical sentence construction; and

Conventions: overall correctness, attention to detail, and an editorial touch (Spandel 2001).

Since I started working with these six traits, I have consistently seen teachers nodding their heads, feeling reaffirmed, and also feeling a sense of empowerment because they now have the words—the language—to have a clearer focus to work with their students. Teachers are also gratified that there is an instructional focus to the traits and not just another assessment to give students.

State Curriculum and Assessment

As a curriculum coordinator, I knew that a district-wide writing program with a philosophy centered on these six traits would have to align with the *Michigan*

Curriculum Framework English Language Arts Content Standards and Benchmarks (1995). Because Michigan takes an integrated approach and reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and visually representing are intertwined in its standards, looking for a “writing” strand in isolation was not possible. Content Standard 2, “All students will demonstrate the ability to write clear and grammatically correct sentences, paragraphs, and compositions,” clearly related the most to writing, but references to writing are throughout the document.

To look at this alignment in depth, I typed and cut out words from the *Framework* that related to writing. I spent a Saturday morning with a group of experienced teachers in discussions about Six Traits and writing. Breaking up the teachers into three groups, I asked them to sort out the curriculum words by traits. Although they worked separately, they found some consistencies:

Ideas: content, inform, characterization, details, aesthetics, innovative

Organization: patterns, conclusions, design, flashback, connective devices

Voice: unique presence, style, inspire, color, confidence, emotion and reason

Word Choice: modifiers, hues, strong verbs, figurative language, word selection

Sentence Fluency: pacing, sentence variety, transitions

Conventions: capitalization, grammatical constructions, mechanics, spelling

The groups also took notes on specific words that overlapped traits (*creativity, innovative, style*) and helped me realize that, even with Six Trait instruction and assessment, everything is not clear-cut, and real life writing is complex and intertwined. It is interesting that a group of knowledgeable writing teachers could see the complexity of the descriptors and also find items that they consider valuable in writing that were not included. For the first time, this made me question the comprehensiveness of the state curriculum and the six traits. It echoed my message that Six Traits is not a writing program; it just gives focus to writing instruction.

The MEAP English Language Arts test assesses for traits in the Part 1 Writing rubric:

- 6 The writing is exceptionally engaging, clear, and focused. **Ideas** and content are thoroughly developed with relevant details and examples where appropriate. The writer's control over **organization** and the connections between ideas moves the reader **smoothly and naturally (sentence fluency)** through the text. The writer shows a mature **command of language (voice)** including precise **word choice** that results in a compelling piece of writing. Tight control over language use and mastery of writing **conventions** contribute to the effect of the response (Michigan, 2002).

While it is clear that the six traits can be found in the descriptors in the state rubric, MEAP data sent to schools is holistic in nature, without having a specific breakdown by trait. Actually, any analytical breakdown of the MEAP rubric is usually separated into Ideas, Organization, Style, and Conventions. So, the assessment rubric is a bit condensed when looked at analytically since "Style" encompasses several traits. In instruction, however, it is possible to break Style down into Voice, Word Choice, and Sentence Fluency, which will give more meaningful feedback to students and also give teachers more information for planning instruction. Again, instruction will be the driving force to make the difference in the writing.

The six traits that have been discovered across the country and embraced across the world are clearly in alignment in Michigan and in other states. This is hopeful because it gives teachers a common language to use when teaching writing to students, and also when assessing writing. This powerful tool for teaching and assessing would have been the exact pieces to the puzzle that I needed when talking to my own students. I can just imagine their faces when they understood more clearly what to revise, how to revise, and how to improve their writing. I would have felt that my instruction was even more meaningful to their growth as writers.

Results

Since I discovered Six Traits, I have been on a whirlwind of inquiry and discovery, searching for what others are doing with Six Traits and what impact it has on writing instruction. In fall 2004, typing "six traits" into a search engine on the Internet yielded 544,000 sites for Web pages. The first Web site to come from the search was the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (<http://www.nwrel.org/assessment>), from which I received my initial training in New Jersey. This site has a tremendous wealth of knowledge, with lesson plans for every grade level for each trait, sample student papers showing strengths and weaknesses in each trait, discussion boards about traits, and even a new section on "Urban Myths" about Six Traits. Their message in that section is not to look at the six traits as a program. That sounds familiar.

While all 544,000 sites are not perfect matches, it is fascinating to look through them to see the rubrics, lessons, and student work relating to the six traits. If I type in more generic "Traits of Writing," the sites are reduced to 464,000, with Six Traits references still at the top. This seems amazing that people everywhere are embracing the traits, but I can only suppose that they are as needy for pieces to the puzzle as I was when I was teaching.

During the past several years, I have conducted more than 1,000 hours in workshops on Six Traits. It is probably the most enjoyable topic that I present, because I know that it gives teachers a focus to what they are already doing in their classrooms. I ask each group of teachers at the beginning why they are there, and teachers say consistently that they want more ideas to teach writing. No one is asking for the answer key to the puzzle. Everyone wants the pieces.

What started centuries ago in composition instruction continues in writing instruction today. What we have now, however, is a clearer focus and a deeper appreciation for the wholeness of a piece of writing, not just its parts. No trait can stand alone, as no puzzle piece can stand alone. Instead the writing needs to come together, and the puzzle pieces need to make a whole picture. The six traits

also provide new ways to help students take control of their own writing as they learn how to write down their ideas, organize their writing, choose interesting language to convey meaning, focus on specifics for revision, and assess what makes

a piece of writing powerful. That is what the true goal of writing instruction should be anyway: to give students the pieces to the puzzle that will help them to fit it together on their own. Six Traits is a step in that direction.

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