Improvement of Writing Instruction

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Introduction

I conducted research on two main areas of writing instruction: individual writing conferences and utilizing rubrics as writing tools. I chose to focus on writing instruction because data collected from my classroom indicated a need in the area of writing. As a whole, students struggled to explain how to support their ideas and lacked confidence in the area of supporting details. Based on data collected in the classroom, it was clear that students struggled in their understanding of supporting details and motivation. Their writing scores and self-assessments showed low confidence and low achievement in multiple areas. Due to this need in my classroom, I was interested to see if the use of individual rubrics would positively impact achievement and confidence. Therefore, the purpose of my study was to determine whether the use of rubrics and implementation of individual conferencing during writing instruction would improve achievement in my 5th grade writing class.

The majority of students in my class lacked motivation in the area of writing and wrote the bare minimum to pass an assignment. In conducting this research, I looked for ideas to help me determine how to structure individual writing conferences. Additionally, I was interested in the use of rubrics as writing tools to guide the writing process. I hoped that the combination of individual writing conferences and rubrics as writing tools would improve attitude and achievement in writing. I recognized the value of writing conferences, but I was not certain how to structure them in my classroom. I had 27 students and found it difficult to give each student meaningful feedback during writing.

The literature review explores rubrics as tools in the writing process and the benefits and concerns of creating them. Additionally, I found that creating models of varying scores

(excellent, approaching, poor) could be a tool to help clearly define expectations. Next, the review discusses the impact of writing conferences and many different ways to structure them. I selected strategies which would work best for my group of students, our writing block, and writing struggles (i.e. motivation, attitude, time constraints). Finally, the literature review discusses the combination of rubrics as writing tools, different conference strategies, and how the combination would be implemented in a 5th grade classroom. The research is organized thematically in the order that students would receive instruction with the strategies, though the strategies would be connected upon implementation.

<p align="center">Rubrics as Writing Tools</p>

The use of rubrics as a writing tool is relatively new. Rubrics are typically used as a grading tool for the teacher; determining a student's grade based on criteria on the rubric. Students would not see the rubric until after their work had been graded. However, the use of rubrics as a writing tool is most beneficial if students utilize it to self-assess throughout the drafting and publishing process. According to Andrade (2010), "Self assessment is done on drafts of works in progress in order to inform revision and improvement: it is not a matter of having students determining their own grades" (p. 199). Andrade discussed the benefits of evaluating oneself in order to take responsibility for one's work and progress.

Further, allowing students to see the criteria they will be graded on leaves much less room for confusion and questioning. They know exactly what they need to be successful based on the rubric. Typically, rubrics contain the criteria the assignment will be graded on and examples or descriptions of different levels of success "from excellent to poor" (Andrade et al., 2008). These examples and descriptions show students exactly what is necessary depending on

the grade they hope to achieve. Utilizing rubrics as writing tools (as opposed to grading tools) allows the student to be more involved in the assessment process. While students are not determining their own grades, they clearly understand the expectations set by the rubric (Bradford et al., 2016, p. 264). Since my students typically struggled with effort and would submit the bare minimum, self assessing with a rubric throughout the drafting and publishing processes would be beneficial. The tools would be beneficial as they could guide students to check things off as they completed assignments resulting in more complete products. Additionally, students would be able to see exactly what I expected of them and potential scores for each category.

The three articles centered around using rubrics as writing tools and discussed common themes; most notably self-assessment and clear expectations (Andrade et al., 2008; Andrade et al., 2010; Bradford et al., 2016). I hoped to find a connection between rubrics and conferencing, but I made the assumption based on the research that rubrics could also act as conferencing guides. When I met with students, we could discuss where they were in the writing process, how they would score themselves in different criteria, and how to improve moving forward. Utilizing rubrics as writing tools and discussing the rubric during writing conferences would result in more ownership for student work. Additionally, there would be no surprises when students received grades upon submission.

There were many commonalities between studies regarding the use of rubrics. In fact, each article found support for the idea that using rubrics for self assessment would have positive results on the quality of student writing (Andrade et al., 2008; Andrade et al., 2010; Bradford et al., 2016). Additionally, two out of the three articles discussed the importance of using models to

display what each of the criteria looks like. The teacher would most likely provide an exemplar, approaching, and poor piece of work. These models would serve as an additional tool for students to clearly see and understand the expectations. Further, students can look at the models and determine how they were scored with the rubric (Andrade, 2008, p. 4). I had not considered the benefits of using models. While I typically wrote with my students, I had never scored my own work for their benefit. Showing them three pieces of work varying in quality would give them an idea of how I scored their work. This process would also make them more comfortable self assessing on rubrics.

While there are many benefits to using rubrics as writing tools, there are some concerns. A common concern among articles was the varying degree of understanding among students. While some may feel comfortable using a rubric to self assess, others may struggle to understand how to read it (Bradford et al., 2016). Further, weighted categories are considered most effective in giving "fair" grades. Weighted categories ensure that the teacher is focusing on the standards. For example, the class may be focusing on persuasive writing. In this case, the teacher would put more emphasis on persuading the audience and less emphasis on mechanics and grammar. Students may struggle to understand how categories are weighted (Andrade et al., 2010). Rubrics must be created with students in mind. This realization led me to wonder how I could use the district provided rubric as a guide. Since students may not understand rubrics clearly, I would use some instructional time to explain and model using rubrics.

Strategies for Writing Conferences

The idea of conferencing has taken on many different meanings. Many view conferences as short, structured conversations focusing on a predetermined topic. However, one article

suggests that conferences, specifically writing conferences, take on many different purposes and evolve naturally to accomplish a goal (Phillips & Larson, 2013). With students in mind, teachers naturally gravitate toward having a plan to ensure writing conferences are structured. Structure leads to time management. However, structuring all writing conferences the same way assumes that all students have the same needs (Ricks et al., 2017). Writing conferences are meetings between one teacher and one student. This one-on-one interaction ensures that the student feels comfortable sharing concerns, questions, and achievements with the teacher. In an interview with Nicholas Langer, an experienced 5th grade writing teacher, I learned about the actions he takes to battle time constraints (N. Langer, personal communication, January 2, 2019). We had the same amount of time to work with students in writing. He tries to meet with students every week, but focuses on students who struggle with writing as he has multiple students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). While meeting with students, he suggests one thing to work on and celebrates one area of growth. He keeps a chart close to him to keep track of the students he has met with, how long he met with each student, and whether or not the student will need another conference in the immediate future (Langer, personal interview, 2018). I planned to use a similar chart to keep track of student conferences. The time constraints on our writing block created a need for this kind of organization.

My focus was how to make writing conferences most effective. While Phillips & Larson (2013) discuss the importance of allowing freedom within writing conferences, Ricks (2017) considers the value of "offering suggestions, questioning, and allowing students opportunities to correct their own mistakes" (p. 114). Ricks (2017) also suggests that writing conferences should focus less on correcting mechanics and focus more on discussing content. This suggestion may

help students to be more successful and write more due to the content focus. Freedom within writing conferences may impact students positively (Phillips & Larson, 2013).

Mirzaee & Yaqubi (2016) discuss the importance of silence during writing conferences. It can be difficult for teachers to allow silence after asking questions. However, these few silent moments encourage students to engage in productive struggle. The student becomes aware that the teacher will not always give the answer in times of uncertainty. Silence and think time motivate the student to think deeply about the question, therefore promoting a more thorough answer. While I recognize the importance of structuring my writing block to allow time to meet with each student, I could see silence benefitting my students. Conversely, there is value in feedback. Without feedback, students may be confused about what they need to improve on (Mirzaee & Yaqubi, 2016).

Finally, I found that writing conferences have the ability to improve self-efficacy among young writers. Further, self-efficacy can have a positive effect on the quality of student writing (Bayraktar, 2013). Self-efficacy in reference to writing is a student's belief that he or she can be successful on a piece of writing. It may also describe the belief that he or she can be successful in writing class as a whole. Bayraktar (2013) suggests that writing conferences must consist of certain conversations in order to improve self-efficacy for the student. His study consisted of observing writing conferences and interviewing students later regarding self-efficacy. He found that students were more confident about their writing after student-centered conferences (Bayraktar, 2013, p. 71). Additionally, he recognized the importance of little interruption. After conferences which had been interrupted by other students, the writer was less confident about his or her ability to succeed (Bayraktar, 2013, p. 73). While these conferencing strategies were

beneficial in my classroom, it was a struggle to battle the time constraints on our writing block.

Realistically, some conferences needed more time than others. Some students needed more

guidance in the conversation. Some did not have the need to conference at all. It was important

to keep these differences in mind moving forward.

Conclusion

Overall, the research helped me to envision how my writing conferences could look.

Self-efficacy is vital to improving the "bare minimum" attitudes in classrooms and

student-centered conferences improves that (Bayraktar, 2013). Further, the literature provided

support for silence within writing conferences as opposed to teacher-led conferences.

Sometimes, students just need think time in order to articulate what they need. Additionally, the

silence encourages students to take ownership of their writing. They should not rely on the adult

to give them creative ideas. While moments of silence may be uncomfortable at times, this

method should help students succeed (Mirzaee & Yaqubi, 2016).

Each student has different needs, so no two conferences should look the same. According

to multiple sources (Bayraktar, 2013; Phillips & Larson, 2013; Ricks et al., 2017), conferences

should take different forms depending on the needs of the student. The mixture of freedom,

sharing, guidance, and suggestions should be an effective combination in any classroom. The

more freedom offered to students, the more comfortable they are sharing their thoughts,

concerns, and opinions (Phillips & Larson, 2013). Additionally, it is important to focus less on

grammar and mechanics to make more time for discussion about the content (Ricks, 2017).

Andrade (2008) discusses the benefits of incorporating the use of rubrics to serve as writing

tools. Simple questions about the assignment could be answered by checking the rubric. Further,

students get more comfortable with the skill of self-assessment (Andrade et al., 2008). The action research determined whether the use of rubrics and implementation of individual conferencing during writing instruction improved achievement in a 5th grade writing class.

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