

2020

Teaching Writing: Effective Approaches For The Middle Years

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Recommended Citation

Hunter, J. (2020). Teaching Writing: Effective Approaches For The Middle Years. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 45(12).

<http://dx.doi.org/10.14221/ajte.202v45n12.6>

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Book Review - Teaching Writing: Effective Approaches for The Middle Years

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Daffern, T & Mackenzie, N. M. (Eds.) (2020) *Teaching Writing: Effective Approaches for The Middle Years*. Allen and Unwin.

This edited book ticks a lot of boxes. Daffern and Mackenzie have assembled a cast of experts in the field to explore writing instruction in the middle years of school, which they indicate to be years five to eight, although much of what is explored in this book could also inform the years immediately before and after this period. Daffern and Mackenzie argue that these years are a time of considerable change, developmentally, socially and emotionally, as students make the transition from primary to secondary education and there is a shift in pedagogy as well as in the demands of writing. While the focus of this book is on the pedagogy of writing instruction in the middle years, this is well-grounded in research, effectively connecting research to practice.

Although not presented in sections, the sixteen chapters of this book logically move through some broad themes. Chapters one to four explore the theoretical base, followed by chapters five to nine which examine how meaning is constructed and conveyed in writing, starting at the text level and working down to the word level and the mechanics of writing. Chapters 10 to 14 explore wider issues related to writing instruction, and writing assessment is covered in the final two chapters.

The introductory chapter establishes the reason and focus for the book, defining literacy and writing as an essential skill for both academic and life purposes. While acknowledging the limitations of drawing conclusions from NAPLAN results, Daffern and Mackenzie use these data to examine trends over time, making a case for specific attention to be given to the middle years due to demonstrated diminishing performance as students get older.

Chapter two presents an overview of the theoretical perspectives that have shaped and influenced writing instruction over the last seven or so decades. This leads into a discussion of the major current teaching strategies for writing instruction, allowing the reader to see how what we do today has been influenced and shaped by these understandings. The chapter concludes with an example of how these strategies might be implemented over a sequence of lessons, making clear the links between theory and practice.

In chapter three, Muriel Wells and Damien Lyons share insights from their own research which locates teachers as writers, encouraging teachers to see themselves as writers who write for authentic purposes and suggesting that this provides insights that they can share with their students.

The fourth chapter, written by Daffern with Michèle Anstey and Geoff Bull, explores the multimodal and multiliterate nature of writing in the 21st century through the idea of text design. The understanding of text is broadened, and authors explore the use of multiple semiotic systems (linguistic, visual, audio, space and gesture) in text production. The complexity of text production is established as the authors use Hayes and Berninger's (2014) framework of cognitive processes to unpack what is involved in text creation. This theory is linked to classroom practice using a familiar example.

These four introductory chapters provide the backdrop for several chapters which follow, and which focus on text production, meaning-making and pedagogy. Starting at the text level, Beverley Derewianka explains how a functional approach to understanding how language works can support meaning-making through text structure and cohesion. These explanations are well supported with many practical examples. In chapter six, Beryl Exley and Lisbeth Ann Kitson compare traditional and functional grammar to show how a functional grammar orientation allows a greater understanding of how language choices at the sentence level work to create meaning.

Chapter seven, written by Mackenzie and Daffern, discusses the importance of vocabulary instruction. There is discussion of what it means to know a word, as well as making decisions about what words to choose for instruction, and this is followed with many practical examples of word-learning and word-gathering activities that can be used in the classroom. In chapter eight, Noella Mackenzie is joined by Rebecca Spokes to consider issues related to handwriting and keyboarding, and the impact that fluency in these areas can have on thinking, planning and translation. In this chapter, the authors argue for explicit instruction in these skills through the middle years of schooling. In chapter nine, Tessa Daffern examines how spelling supports meaning-making, also arguing that fluency in this area is necessary for supporting higher-order thinking processes such as translation. The elements of spelling in English are briefly considered and common theories of spelling development are outlined. A very useful table of phonological, orthographic and morphological features is presented, and this is followed by an example spelling error analysis which can be used to inform instruction.

Having discussed a range of issues associated with how meaning is constructed in written texts, the chapters which follow explore a range of issues that demand particular consideration in the writing classroom. Michèle Anstey and Geoff Bull's chapter on multimodality offers insights into the demands of writing and creating multimodal texts. They propose a pedagogy that moves away from a focus on the product, but which instead concentrates on the processes and strategies that are required to support the production of multimodal texts. They argue that this demands increasingly flexible and dynamic approaches in order to meet the needs of continually changing texts and technology. Their chapter discusses the pedagogical implications for working with multimodal texts, including insights into text design and the development of a metalanguage for supporting the process.

Helen Harper, Bronwyn Parkin and Jennifer Rennie explore the range of writing challenges that can be experienced by students for whom English is an additional language or dialect. Their chapter offers a teaching sequence which strongly scaffolds learners to develop the literate resources needed for constructing narrative. While they acknowledge that learners need to gain control of a range of text types, they argue that narrative offers an effective "bridge" into academic writing, as it allows students to draw on their existing funds of knowledge to support the task.

The next two chapters explore the issue of writing in discipline areas. Tessa Daffern, Elizabeth Baker and Lauren Elise Barlow explore what this looks like in the upper primary classroom, while Lisbeth Ann Kitson focuses on the lower secondary years. Daffern, Baker and Barlow explain that while writing in discipline areas offers many authentic purposes for writing, the demands of writing in these areas become increasingly more complex, abstract and technical as students move through the upper years of primary school. Their chapter presents a series of vignettes of writing instruction across a range of discipline areas, exemplifying the sequence of instruction in each. Kitson's chapter builds on this. As students move into the secondary years, she explains, the demands of writing in each of the subject areas become increasingly more cognitively demanding and particular, as the requirements of each discipline become more specialised. Kitson's chapter examines the

types of texts that students are typically required to produce in the early secondary years and explores the specific demands of writing in each of the discipline areas.

Natalie Thompson and Chris Stevens present a range of evidence-based strategies to build inclusive writing communities which will support students who experience difficulties with writing. The chapter includes advice on how to build a supportive classroom climate, using scaffolds and supports to foster self-efficacy and independence, as well as outlining tried and tested pedagogies for addressing difficulties with sentence construction, vocabulary use, spelling and editing.

The final two chapters address the assessment of writing. The first of these, written by Tessa Daffern and Mary Ryan, discusses teacher-led approaches to assessment. Daffern and Ryan outline the various purposes for writing assessment and present three frameworks for assessment, directed in turn towards the processes used or observed, the writing product and the writing choices made by the writer. These frameworks would be particularly useful for initiating and leading teacher-student conferences around writing. The second of these chapters, written by Natalie Thompson and Paul Grover, explores student-led approaches to assessment, providing examples of how portfolios, conferences, peer assessments and student-designed rubrics can support students to increasingly take control of and responsibility for their own writing development.

Throughout each chapter of this book, there are several invitations to “*pause, reflect and take action*”, providing useful questions and prompts for self-reflection and ideas for thinking about and adjusting classroom practice. Other useful features of the book are a glossary, which explains some of the specialised terms, and an appendix of graphic organisers for writing as well as blank templates for frameworks that are presented through the book.

This book provides a very comprehensive view of writing instruction for the middle years. It would be useful for students in initial teacher education as well as for practising teachers. Reading this book reminded me of some ideas and issues about writing instruction that I had not thought about in a while, provided new and alternate ways of thinking about approaches that are already known, and introduced some compelling new ideas about writing instruction. I would recommend it as a highly useful addition to the bookshelf of anyone who cares about writing instruction in the middle years.