

F O U R T H   E D I T I O N

# *Best* **Practice**

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Bringing Standards to Life  
in America's Classrooms

Steven Zemelman  
Harvey "Smokey" Daniels  
Arthur Hyde

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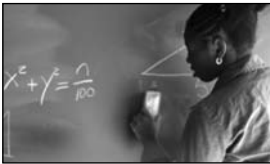
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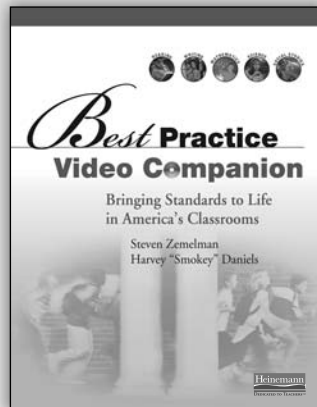
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► **The *Best Practice Video Companion*—Coming Fall 2012**

The *Best Practice Video Companion* will include short, lively video clips of students and teachers at work in outstanding classrooms for authentic illustrations of each key strategy described in the book. For education courses, PLCs, teacher book clubs, and communities of practice, it will provide brief and specific looks at the learning activities discussed in *Best Practice*, Fourth Edition. This resource will make concrete what is involved in great teaching and learning. Watch [Heinemann.com](http://Heinemann.com) for more information.



## *Welcome, Colleagues*

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This is a book about excellent teaching and powerful learning. Its principles come from authoritative and reliable sources—the major professional organizations, research centers, and subject-matter groups in American education. Its recommendations draw upon scientific research of rigorous design, both experimental and qualitative. The classroom stories woven through the book come from some of the country’s most accomplished teachers. And the practices endorsed here have proven effective with students from kindergarten through high school, across the curriculum, and among learners of diverse languages, abilities, backgrounds, and learning styles.

This book is for everyone in education—for young teachers just entering their training; for principals, administrators, instructional coaches, parents, and school board members; for researchers and policy makers and politicians; and even for old-timers like us three coauthors—each with more than forty years of teaching under our belts. The work of this volume is to get us all on the same page, speaking the same language about kids and learning. Here, we gather to find the consensus, the core, the fundamental understandings that bind us together in the service of students, no matter what role we take in their growth and development. When we educators read and discuss this rich and powerful information—as veterans, as newbies, as faculties, as teams—we define for ourselves what “best practice” means, and how we can embody it in our work with young people.

Lately, the education profession has been living through a tumultuous time. Nearly everyone in the society has gotten into the act of “reforming” schools: politicians, business titans, think tanks, taxpayers, commentators, pundits, journalists, and researchers. Education-oriented cover stories, blue-ribbon commissions, government reports, exposés, recommendations, talk shows, documentaries, conferences, jokes, gossip, and legislation abound. Indeed, we are writing this book during the reign of yet another “education president,” in a state with a self-declared “education governor,” and in Chicago, a city famed for its high profile school reform projects.

While heartfelt public concern about education is certainly useful, very little of this sudden interest has been admiring, pleasant, or even civil. Our national reappraisal of education began with widespread anger about urban dropout rates, worry about low test scores, and fears about the perceived slippage in American workers’ global competitiveness. These concerns are constantly stirred by a drumbeat of downbeat headlines, such as this morning’s offering: “Shocking News: 82% of U.S. Schools Failing.” Not surprisingly,

much of this school reform energy has been spent on blaming and finger-pointing: responsibility for our nation's educational disappointments has been enthusiastically and variously apportioned among TV, video games, single-parent families, teacher unions, urban gangs, bad textbooks, sexual permissiveness, drugs, schools of education, and dozens of other causes.

But now, after almost three decades of recriminations and reform efforts, we finally have a new national momentum, a fresh set of common standards, and a mandate from both the federal government and the public at large to make big changes in the way we educate this country's young people.

Yet, notwithstanding the grand politics and stirring headlines, teaching at its core remains a very personal, one-to-one enterprise. With all the research that's flown by in recent years, one of the most prominent findings has been just how much the quality of teaching matters. Give a child a good teacher for three years in a row, and that kid's achievement scores will be 50 percent higher than with ineffective teachers during that same span (Zuckerman 2011). Put students in classrooms where teachers get to know kids personally and invite their interaction, and test scores rise (Newmann 2001). Explicitly teach kids the social skills of collaboration, and both achievement test scores and grades rise 11 percent (Durlak 2011). Indeed, the single most powerful variable in student achievement—more than socioeconomic status or school funding—is the quality of the teaching learners receive. But what does *quality* mean?

How do good teachers create those gains, minute by minute, day by day? Standards and curricula and mandates may explain *what* students should learn—but where's the *how*? *How* do those world-class, kids'-life-changing teachers do it? What do they say and do, in what order, and with what shadings and tones? How do they organize space and allocate time? How do they open up their heads and demonstrate skillful thinking in math, science, reading, history? How do they create sequences of activities that lead learners to deep understanding? How do they build conceptual knowledge that lasts beyond Friday's test? How do they find and use the most powerful materials, the most engaging texts? How do they keep each child in the zone between the known and the unknown, between the easy-peasy and the too-damn-hard? How do they shape growth, give feedback, offer encouragement, and provide challenge?

We seek to answer those questions here, in stories from classrooms, in research findings, in exemplary lessons and rich units of study.

Teaching is a unique profession. No matter what happens on the macro-national-political level, the real work always comes down to a group of young people and one grown-up, a teacher. Once that classroom door is closed, everything depends on the knowledge, planning, artistry, and heart



of that special adult. When teachers bring Best Practice to life, kids find their curiosity fanned, their questions honored, their work ethic stimulated, their craftsmanship and pride rewarded. A hunger for knowledge becomes the most natural and delightful appetite of all. No matter how much shouting and static may be happening in the world outside the school, the classroom can still be a sacred space, one where spirits coalesce, lives change, and futures are forged. This book seeks to define and describe that space.

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## Chapter 1

# What Do We Mean *by*

# Best Practice?

The expression “best practice” was originally borrowed from the professions of medicine, law, and architecture, where “good practice” and “best practice” are everyday phrases used to describe solid, reputable, state-of-the-art work in a field. If a professional is following best practice standards, he or she is aware of current research and consistently offers clients the full benefits of the latest knowledge, technology, and procedures. If a doctor, for example, does not follow contemporary standards of medicine and a case turns out badly, peers may criticize his decisions and treatments by saying something like, “That was simply not best practice.”

Until recently, we haven’t had an everyday term for state-of-the-art work in education. In fact, some veteran teachers would even *deny* the need for a current, research-based standard of instruction. “I just give ’em the basics,” such teachers say. “It’s worked just fine for thirty years, and I don’t go for any of this newfangled mumbo-jumbo.” One wonders how long such self-satisfied teachers would continue going to a doctor who says: “I practice medicine exactly the same way today that I did thirty years ago. I haven’t changed a thing. I don’t pay any attention to all that newfangled mumbo-jumbo—MRIs, vaccines, antibiotics, and such.”

Some people insist that education as a field does not enjoy the clear-cut evolution of medicine, law, or architecture. But still, if educators are people who take ideas seriously, who believe in inquiry, and who subscribe to the possibility of human progress, then our professional language must label and respect practice that is at the leading edge of the field. So that’s why we have imported (and capitalized) the term *Best Practice*—as a shorthand emblem of serious, thoughtful, informed, responsible, state-of-the-art teaching.

As you’ll learn in the following pages, there is a strong consensus among the seemingly disparate subject-matter fields about how kids learn best. Virtually all the authoritative voices and documents in every teaching field are calling for schools that are more student-centered, active, experiential, authentic, democratic, collaborative, rigorous, and challenging. That’s a short definition of Best Practice teaching; the rest of the book will deepen that description.

But since this book began its life in 1993, the term *Best Practice* itself has suffered from “terminology drift,” a process by which useful educational ideas become overly popular, are carelessly used, and come unmoored from their original meanings. When we see “Best Practice worksheets” being sold at professional conferences, and tucked into free “Best Practice” tote bags, we get worried. So in just a moment, we will begin defining more precisely what we mean by Best Practice.

This book is about the really big ideas in education, the ones with depth and staying power. You’ll soon be visiting classrooms and schools where these enduring ideas are honored and their distinctive activities are enacted. And while *Best Practice* deals mostly in facts, it also has a strong, unabashed, and partisan vision: we believe (and we hope we are about to prove) that progressive educational principles can and should govern classroom practice in American schools. While some people belittle the earlier cycles of progressive innovation during the 1930s and 1960s as transient fads, this book shows how the current wave of curriculum-based reform connects and culminates those past eras, and offers hope of creating the strongest and most enduring school improvements this country has ever seen.

*This book is about the really big ideas in education, the ones with depth and staying power.*

## THE COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

Since 1993, each successive edition of *Best Practice* has drawn upon authoritative and current sources to define “best practice teaching.” For us, this has meant looking for consensus among scores of reports from subject-matter organizations, research centers, and professional groups. Back in the 1980s and 1990s, more than a dozen curricular organizations, including the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, the International Reading Association, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and the National Council of Teach-

ers of English, issued standards documents that are still in force today, many having been revised and updated in the interim. Organizations like the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards have created and maintained clear specifications of what constitutes excellent teaching. So, in this book, we happily undertake the correlation of all these sources once again.

But now, with this fourth edition, we have a major new resource to draw upon—the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), as developed by the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association. As we go to press, forty-five states have signed on to the CCSS Standards for English Language Arts and Mathematics, thus agreeing to have their own standards, developed mostly in the 1990s and 2000s, replaced by their national counterparts. Many agencies, state departments of education, and commercial publishers have begun offering curricula matched to these standards. Also coming soon are new national assessments designed to stimulate and measure student progress on the new standards.

These are landmark developments. Since America’s founding, the work of educating children has mainly been left to local communities. Indeed, some have said that our public schools are the last vestige of local governance left in our democracy. Now, with the Common Core and all its ancillary mandates, America for the first time moves toward a truly national educational system. Some, but not all, of the most educationally effective countries in the world have taken this approach. Now we are going to see how it works for America.

The CCSS really “raise the bar.” Many math teachers say that the standards make mathematics two years tougher; work that used to be done in fifth grade is now pushed down to third, while formerly third-grade work is now required in first. The English language arts standards are less consistent, but their key word is *complexity*; the standards writers insist that all students should be reading books that are on grade level, with neither teacher nor textual support. Clearly the theme is “tough love.”

Our own plaintive cry is, can we please have the *rigor* without the *mortis*? Here’s what we see as some opportunities and some difficulties with the Common Core Standards.

### ► ***Strengths of the Common Core State Standards***

- Expectations for students and teachers are general but clear.
- Rich and challenging curriculum and materials are endorsed.
- Content consistency across grade levels and subjects is valuable in a mobile society.
- The call for more nonfiction reading and writing redresses an old curricular imbalance.

- More active classrooms are recommended, with higher levels of student engagement, collaboration, and responsibility.
- The need for scaffolding is recognized, for gradual learning ladders that allow students to reach higher goals.
- The standards leave pedagogy to teachers. “Teachers are free to provide students with whatever tools and knowledge their professional judgment and experience identify as most helpful in meeting the goals set out in the Standards” (CCSS, ELA, 4).

### ► ***Challenges in the Common Core State Standards***

- Authorship did not include teachers, eroding trust among potential users.
- Grade-level standards are sometimes inconsistent: some targets are far too low, many are impossibly high.
- The omission of science and social studies, except as they include literacy skills, as well as the arts and languages means these subjects will receive less time and teaching in schools.
- Recommended readings stress very old and “classic” texts, implicitly repudiating contemporary children’s, young adult, and multicultural literature.
- Most educated adults in our communities could not meet the CCSS.
- The full standards documents are overwhelming, covering 356 pages.
- Standards leave teachers wondering: “What do I do?”

One further note: the ultimate impact of the CCSS on classrooms will be determined by the tests used to measure student achievement—and teacher performance. The tests now being developed will, at least at first, look very much like the high-stakes standardized tests we already administer in most states. It will take several more years to create the computer-based, multiple, largely formative assessments envisioned by the two consortia currently developing the tests. Under the worrisome headline “Technological-Capacity Questions Dog Assessment Consortia,” an *Education Week* story details all the difficulties with instituting national tests in a school system that is still highly decentralized, diverse, and, in fact, may not even be able to meet the electricity demands of a national computerized test (Gewertz 2011).

The establishment of the CCSS offers educators an array of opportunities—and some problems as well. But one thing is for sure: these standards do not show teachers how to teach. Indeed, the framers of the standards explicitly fore-sware the realm of pedagogy:

The best understanding of what works in the classroom comes from the teachers who are in them. That’s why these standards will establish *what* students need to learn, but they will not dictate *how* teachers should teach. Instead, schools and teachers will decide how best to help students reach the standards. (CCSS ELA, 3)

It is that vital missing link—effective, skillful, powerful teaching—that we explicitly address in this book. There’s one final thing we can predict with complete confidence: as always, students who have been taught well, who have actively explored a rich and challenging curriculum, will score very well on *whatever* tests are designed and given in any year.

## THE CONSENSUS ON BEST PRACTICE

The more/less chart on pages 6–7 gives an overview of Best Practice teaching—what it looks like, and what it doesn’t. Obviously, there is more afoot here than the congruence of teaching recommendations from traditionally separate fields of the American school curriculum. A more general educational paradigm has developed across content boundaries and grade levels. This coherent philosophy and spirit reaches across the curriculum and up through the grades. Whether it is called Best Practice, inquiry learning, interdisciplinary studies, project-based learning, or authentic instruction, or some other name or no name at all, this evolving paradigm is broad and deep and enduring.

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**SOURCES OF CONSENSUS** To outsiders, education must sometimes look like a pretty fractious field. And there’s no doubt, we do have our hot-button issues. When school people get into debates about phonics or classroom management or which founding fathers to revere most, things can get heated. But these occasional dustups, often superhyped by the media, are truly the exception. Much as in medicine or architecture or law, there are widely, deeply held agreements—best practices—that bind the profession together. Educators enjoy a vast web of underlying agreements about what effective teaching and learning look like. These ideas have developed over many decades of research, study, experimentation, analysis, and documentation. Despite differing perspectives and opinions, the major stakeholders in education have agreed upon a family of practices, a broad instructional consensus, that informs this book—and which we have represented in the more/less chart. Complete references may be found at the end of this chapter, but here we list the key organizations, reports, and other works from which we have principally drawn.

- *American Association for the Advancement of Science* 2007
- *Carnegie Corporation* 2006, 2010
- *Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement* 2008
- *Center for the Study of Mathematics Curriculum* 2010
- *Common Core State Standards* 2010
- *Daniels* 2011
- *Darling-Hammond* 2008, 2010
- *Farstrup and Samuels* 2002
- *Graham and Perin* 2007
- *Harste* 1989
- *Herczog* 2010
- *Hillocks* 1986
- *Kamil, Pearson, Moje, and Afflerbach* 2011
- *National Association for the Education of Young Children* 2009
- *National Board for Professional Teaching Standards* 2003, 2008
- *National Center for History in the Schools* 1996
- *National Council for the Social Studies* 1994, 1997, 2010
- *National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association* 1996, 2009
- *National Council of Teachers of Mathematics* 1991, 1995, 2000, 2006
- *National Institute of Education* 1985
- *National Reading Panel* 2000
- *National Research Council* 1996, 2000, 2007, 2009, 2011
- *National Staff Development Council* 2011
- *Partnership for 21st Century Skills* 2011
- *Sierra-Perry* 1996
- *Smagorinsky* 1996
- *Wilhelm* 1996

# Common Recommendations of National Curriculum Reports

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This chart represents the consensus definition of Best Practice as two sets of bullet points: things to reduce in the classroom, and things to increase. Or, to put it more succinctly, what should teachers do less and what should they do more?



## LESS

- **LESS** whole-class, teacher-directed instruction (e.g., lecturing)
- **LESS** student passivity: sitting, listening, receiving, and absorbing information
- **LESS** solitude and working alone
- **LESS** presentational, one-way transmission of information from teacher to student
- **LESS** rigidity in classroom seating arrangements
- **LESS** prizing of silence in the classroom
- **LESS** classroom time devoted to fill-in-the-blank worksheets, dittos, workbooks, and other “seatwork”
- **LESS** student time spent reading textbooks and basal readers
- **LESS** focus on “covering” large amounts of material in every subject area
- **LESS** rote memorization of facts and details
- **LESS** reliance on shaping behavior through punishments and rewards
- **LESS** tracking or leveling of students into “ability groups”
- **LESS** use of pull-out special programs
- **LESS** emphasis on competition and grades in school
- **LESS** time given to standardized test preparation
- **LESS** use of and reliance on standardized tests





# MORE

- **MORE** experiential, hands-on learning
- **MORE** active learning, with all the attendant noise and movement of students doing and talking
- **MORE** student-student interaction
- **MORE** flexible seating and working areas in the classroom
- **MORE** diverse roles for teachers, including coaching, demonstrating, and modeling
- **MORE** emphasis on higher-order thinking, on learning a field's key concepts and principles
- **MORE** deep study of a smaller number of topics, so that students internalize the field's way of inquiry
- **MORE** development of students' curiosity and intrinsic motivation to drive learning
- **MORE** reading of real texts: whole books, primary sources, and nonfiction materials
- **MORE** responsibility transferred to students for their work: goal setting, record keeping, monitoring, sharing, exhibiting, and evaluating
- **MORE** choice for students (e.g., choosing their own books, writing topics, team partners, and research projects)
- **MORE** enacting and modeling of the principles of democracy in school
- **MORE** attention to affective needs and varying cognitive styles of individual students
- **MORE** cooperative, collaborative activity; developing the classroom as an interdependent community
- **MORE** heterogeneous classrooms where individual needs are met through individualized activities, not segregation of bodies
- **MORE** delivery of special help to students in regular classrooms
- **MORE** varied and cooperative roles for teachers, parents, and administrators
- **MORE** use of formative assessments to guide student learning
- **MORE** reliance on descriptive evaluations of student growth, including observational/anecdotal records, conference notes, and performance assessment rubrics

## ► *Clusters of Best Practice Principles*

What is the nature of this new/old instructional model? What assumptions and theories about learning inform this approach? If we study the more/less list systematically, we can identify fourteen interlocking principles, assumptions, or theories that characterize this model of education. These principles are deeply interrelated, each influencing the others. And the list of principles, as you'll see, can be grouped into three main clusters: student-centered, cognitive, and interactive.

**F**or almost any chunk of required subject matter, we can find “a way in” that can activate kids’ intrinsic motivation.

### **STUDENT-CENTERED**

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The best starting point for schooling is young people’s questions and interests; all across the curriculum, beginning with students’ own questions should take precedence over the recounting of arbitrarily and distantly selected information. For almost any chunk of required subject matter, we can find “a way in”—a subtopic, a puzzle, an angle, an implication—that can activate kids’ intrinsic motivation.

**Authentic:** Real, rich, complex ideas and materials are at the heart of the curriculum. Lessons or textbooks that water down, control, or oversimplify content ultimately disempower students.

**Holistic:** Young people learn best when they encounter whole ideas, events, and materials in purposeful contexts, not by studying subparts isolated from actual use.

**Experiential:** Active, hands-on, concrete experience is the most powerful and natural form of learning. Students should be immersed in the most direct experience possible for the content of every subject.

**Challenging:** Students learn best when faced with genuine challenges, choices, and responsibility in their own learning. We need to provide “content ladders” that move kids steadily upward in complexity and challenge, as school years and school careers proceed toward college and career readiness.

### **COGNITIVE**

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The most powerful learning comes when children develop true understanding of concepts through higher-order thinking associated with various fields of inquiry and through self-monitoring of their thinking. This means teachers must explicitly model the characteristic thinking processes and strategies of each subject area, apprenticing their students to the field’s ways of knowing.

**Developmental:** Children grow through a series of definable but not rigid stages, and schooling should fit its activities to the developmental level of students.

**Constructivist:** Children do not just receive content; in a very real sense, they re-create and reinvent every cognitive system they encounter, including language, literacy, and mathematics. Students' work in school should be building knowledge through inquiry, not simply listening to someone else mention information.

**Expressive:** To fully engage with ideas, construct meaning, and remember information, students must regularly employ the whole range of communicative media—speech, writing, drawing, poetry, dance, drama, music, movement, and visual arts.

**Reflective:** Balancing the immersion in experience must be opportunities for learners to reflect, debrief, and abstract from their experiences what they have thought and learned. Putting that reflection to work, students set goals for themselves, monitor their progress, and take responsibility for their own growth.

## INTERACTIVE

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Powerful learning happens in classrooms where there is lively conversation, discussion, and debate. Teachers tap the power of young peoples' social energy to advance their thinking.

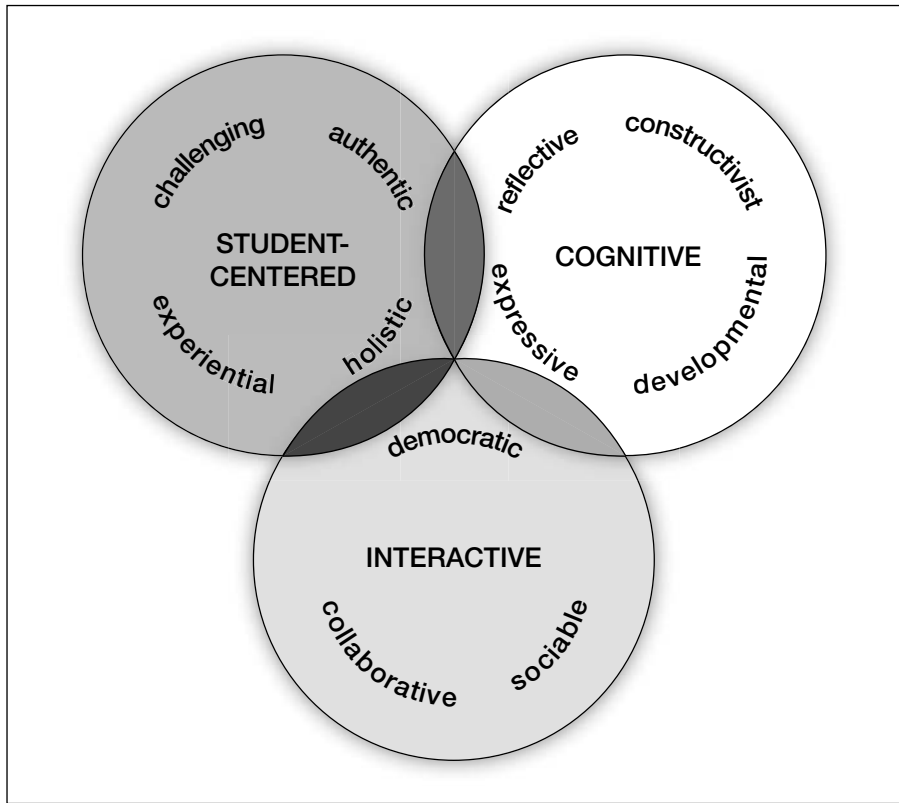
**Sociable:** Learning happens most efficiently in an atmosphere of friendliness and mutual support, and teachers take steps to create safe, comfortable, and energizing classroom communities.

**Collaborative:** Small-group learning activities draw upon the social power of learning better than individualistic, competitive approaches. In school, as in life, people must learn to work effectively in small groups—with partners, teams, and longer-term inquiry groups of all types.

**Democratic:** The classroom is a model community; students learn what they live as members of that community. In school, we are not just training “consumers”; we are nurturing citizens—our future neighbors, coworkers, and fellow voters.

We can represent these three clusters of principles graphically, as shown in Figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1  
Three clusters of  
principles



## THE IMPORTANCE OF BEST PRACTICE PRINCIPLES

The remainder of this book, as we discuss each subject in the school curriculum, spells out what these key principles really mean in practice. However, to explain why these ideas are so important, we elaborate briefly on them here.

***Schooling should be STUDENT-CENTERED, taking its cues from young people's interests, concerns, and questions.*** Making school student-centered involves building on the natural curiosity children bring with them and asking kids what they want to learn. Teachers help students list their own questions, puzzles, and goals, and then structure for them widening circles of experience and investigation of those topics. Teachers infuse into such kid-driven curricula all the skills, knowledge, and concepts that society mandates—or that the state curriculum guide requires—though always in original sequences and combinations.

But student-centered schooling does not mean passive teachers who respond only to students' explicit cues. Teachers also draw on their deep understanding of children's developmental needs and enthusiasms to design experiences that lead students into areas they might not choose, but that they will enjoy and engage in deeply. Teachers also bring their own interests into the classroom to share, at an age-appropriate level, demonstrating how a learner gets involved with ideas. Thus, student-centered education begins by cordially inviting children's whole, real lives into the classroom; it solicits and listens to their questions; and it provides a balance between activities that follow children's lead and ones that lead children. And it places the teacher very firmly in the roles of model and coach, as the most experienced learner in the room.

***Learning activities need to be AUTHENTIC.*** Kids want to know how the world works and how they fit in. Sometimes we adults err by offering simplified materials and activities so children are not overwhelmed with complexity. But too often we underestimate children and oversimplify things, creating materials or situations that are so synthetic as to be unlikelike—and, ironically, educationally worthless. The most notorious examples of this are the linguistically deprived stories appearing in some basal reading texts. We now understand that children routinely handle phenomenal complexity in their own daily lives—indeed, learning the thousands of abstract rules underlying spoken language is proof of kids' ability to sort out the complex tangle of data the real world inevitably presents.

What does authenticity mean in the curriculum? In reading, it means that the rich, artful, and complex vocabulary of Grimm's fairy tales is far more educational than the dumbed-down "decodable" versions in some commercial reading programs. In math, it means that children investigate ways of dividing a pizza or a cake, rather than working the odd-numbered fractions problems at the end of the chapter. Authenticity also means that children are reading and writing and calculating and investigating for purposes that they have chosen, not just because the teacher gave an assignment or because a task appears in a textbook. Yes, teachers can and should sometimes give assignments that a whole class works on, to share and compare the resulting ideas they've generated. But if teachers don't also take steps to turn schoolwork into something the children truly own, then the results will be mechanical, more an exercise in dutifully following directions than in real valuing of thought and knowledge.

***Learning in all subjects needs to be HOLISTIC.*** In the conventional American curriculum, information and ideas are presented to children in small "building blocks." While the teacher may find these subparts meaningful and may know they add up to an eventual understanding of a subject, their purpose and significance aren't always apparent to children. This part-to-whole approach

undercuts motivation for learning because learners don't perceive why they are doing the work. It disconnects skills from thinking and analyzing. It also deprives students of an essential condition for learning—encountering material in its full, lifelike context. When the “big picture” is put off until later, “later” often never comes. We know that children do, in fact, need to acquire skills and abilities such as spelling and multiplying and evaluating good evidence for written arguments. But holistic learning means that children gain these abilities most effectively by going from whole to part—when kids read whole books, write whole stories, and carry out whole investigations of natural phenomena, and in the process practice specific basic skills. Brief lessons on the use of quotation marks are learned fastest and remembered longest when the class writes personal narratives enhanced with dialogue. And, meanwhile, the focus on a rich whole text or inquiry ensures that children are simultaneously making far more mental connections—albeit often unconscious ones—than the teacher ever has time to directly teach within the one or two or three “skills” that she has time to cover.

**L**ike all humans, students learn most powerfully from doing, not just listening.

***As often as possible, schools should feature learning that is EXPERIENTIAL.***

Like all humans, students learn most powerfully from *doing*, not just listening. This simple psychological fact has different implications in different subjects. In writing and reading, it means that students grow more by composing and reading whole, real texts, rather than doing worksheets and exercises. With mathematics, it means working with objects—sorting, counting, and building patterns of number and shape—and carrying out real-world projects that involve collecting data, estimating, calculating, drawing conclusions, and making decisions. In science, it means conducting experiments and taking field trips to investigate natural settings, pollution problems, and labs at nearby factories, universities, or hospitals. For social studies, students can conduct opinion surveys, prepare group reports that teach the rest of the class, and role-play famous events, conflicts, and political debates. In all school subjects, the key is to help students think more deeply, to discover the detailed implications of ideas through direct or simulated immersion in them.

***Following all these principles means that school is CHALLENGING.*** While some people think that experiential, authentic, holistic tasks are “easier” for students, teachers using state-of-the-art practices know that the opposite is true. Requiring students to choose and develop their own topics for writing, for example, makes their task harder, not easier. If the teacher simply commands: “Imagine you are a butterfly. Write one paragraph with lots of adjectives telling how it feels to land on a flower,” the author’s job is basically fill-in-the-blanks. The really challenging work is for young writers to find their own topics every day—pursuing the promising ones as far as they will go, discarding the clunk-

ers, then revising or starting over. This idea of getting students off cognitive welfare and into taking responsibility for their own learning is an earmark of Best Practice. As the Common Core Standards remind us, students should be steadily working their way up to more complex tasks, taking increasing responsibility for their own learning.

**Powerful learning comes from COGNITIVE experiences.** Many teachers have moved well beyond believing that memorized definitions constitute real understanding and are reorganizing their classrooms to facilitate higher-order, conceptual learning. Full comprehension and appreciation for concepts such as *tangent*, *democracy*, *metaphor*, and *photosynthesis* come from complex, varied experiences that gradually build deep understanding that is increasingly abstract, general, and powerful.

Teachers must help students develop the specific types of thinking that our civilization values, such as analytical reasoning, interpretation, metaphorical thinking, creative design, categorization, hypothesizing, drawing inferences, and synthesis. Students need to experience these kinds of thinking for themselves, with appropriate modeling and facilitation from their teachers and others. When they do, language, thinking, and conceptual understanding are intertwined as students *construct* ideas, systems, and processes for themselves.

The National Research Council (2000, 2007, 2009) has shown how the principles and findings on cognition can be used to guide students' understanding in school. Three major implications for teaching emerge:

1. *The importance of activating prior understandings.* New understandings are necessarily constructed on a foundation of existing understandings and experiences.
2. *The essential role of factual knowledge and conceptual frameworks in understanding.* Factual knowledge must be placed in a conceptual framework to be well understood. Concepts are given meaning by multiple representations that are rich in factual detail.
3. *The importance of self-monitoring.* Often called “metacognition,” appropriate self-monitoring and reflection can support learning with understanding. Helping students to become effective learners means enabling them to take control of their own learning, consciously define learning goals, and monitor their own progress.

**Children's learning must be approached as DEVELOPMENTAL.** This is one of the most carelessly used words in educational parlance, used to support all sorts of contradictory ideas. To us, *developmental* does not mean labeling or teaching students according to their purported level on a fixed hierarchy of cognitive stages. Nor does it mean lockstep instruction according to some textbook

**A**s the Common Core Standards remind us, students should be steadily working their way up to more complex tasks, taking increasing responsibility for their own learning.

company's scope and sequence chart. Instead, *developmental* means that teachers approach classroom groups and individual students with a respect for their emerging capabilities. We recognize that kids grow in common patterns but at different rates that usually cannot be accelerated by adult pressure or input. Developmentally oriented teachers know that variance in the school performance of different children often results from differences in general growth. Such variations in the speed but not the direction or the ultimate degree of development should not be grounds for splitting up groups, but rather are diversities to be welcomed and melded into the richness of the classroom.

In developmental schooling, we help children by recognizing and encouraging beginning steps when they occur—whether on schedule or not. We study the research on how children actually advance in math or spelling and build programs around this knowledge, rather than marching through arbitrary word lists or problems. In complex areas like writing, we chart children's progress in many ingredients of composing and understand how some abilities will appear to regress as children challenge themselves with other, more difficult rhetorical tasks. In math, along with review and exploration of this week's topic, we include challenging, enjoyable activities that go beyond the textbook unit so that we find out what various kids are really ready for.

***Children's learning involves their CONSTRUCTING ideas and systems.*** Studies of early language acquisition, science learning in school, reading processes, mathematical cognition, and many other areas show that human beings never just take in and memorize material. Even when staring at clouds or smoke or trash in an empty lot, we are constantly trying to find meaning in what we see. In a very real sense, people reinvent whatever they encounter, by constantly making and revising mental models of the world. That's exactly how we learn complex systems like mathematics, language, anthropology, or anything else. For example, when two-year-olds invent and use words like *feets* or *goed*, words that they have never heard from any adult, they are demonstrating constructivism. Children don't just imitate the language around them; they use it as raw material to generate hypotheses, to reinvent the language itself. Along the way, they create original, temporary forms that serve until new hypotheses generate new structures. Kids don't merely learn to speak; every one of them, in a profound sense, rebuilds his or her native language.

Best Practice teachers recognize that all children can reinvent math, reading, and writing, no matter how "disadvantaged" their backgrounds, and they are eager to tap into the thinking abilities children bring to school. They know that the keys are experience, immersion, and engagement in a safe, interactive community. Kids need much time to practice reading, writing, doing mathematics, and experimenting. They need encouragement to reflect, to share their



emerging ideas and hypotheses with others, to have their errors and temporary understandings respected. Constructivist teachers cheerfully embrace the understanding that their most helpful role isn't one of direct telling and teaching. Indeed, given the fundamentally internal nature of this deep learning, presenting rules, skills, or facts plays only a limited role in students' growth. Instead, teachers model their own thinking, and create conditions in which children can steadily construct their own understandings.

***Students need to learn and practice many forms of EXPRESSION to deeply engage ideas.*** Traditional school has been reception-based; that is, students sit quietly and listen while the teacher talks, mentions, presents, tells, opines, and explains—supposedly “filling them up” with the curriculum. We now understand that learning doesn't work this way, and we recognize the sad irony of schools in which teachers do all the expressing. Recent brain research shows that to understand, own, and remember ideas, students need not just to receive, but also to *act upon them* (Steineke 2008). Expressing ideas can mean something as simple as talking in pairs or peer groups or having a written conversation with a partner, or as sophisticated as preparing and presenting a formal public report or creating an artifact that embodies the concepts under study. When a learner can successfully translate an idea from one medium to another—for example, expressing the Sixth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in a dramatic skit or a sonnet—we realize that she possesses the information in a solid and flexible way. And, aside from the cognitive benefits of such rich instruction, expression taps into many children's love of performing. Indeed, it is a natural human tendency to find a friendly audience and exercise your strongest medium of expression. A progressive curriculum stresses exhibitions and performances, inviting students to express ideas through the widest possible array of media.

***Effective learning is balanced with opportunities for REFLECTION.*** Too often, school is a process of stimulus-response. The work cycle is: do it, turn it in, get your grade, forget it, and move on. But learning is greatly strengthened when children have time to look back on what they've learned, to digest and debrief, to recognize broader principles, to appreciate their accomplishments and understand how they overcame obstacles. It is hard to think reflectively in the middle of doing an experiment or revising a draft, but afterward students can review what happened and apply what they learned to future efforts.

Is this reflective thinking process foreign to kids? No—we find evidence of it in their play and family interactions all the time. But kids need school time set aside for reflection, and they need to become consciously aware of its power and their ability to use it. Adding reflective thinking to school learning can be a simple instructional innovation. When kids finish a small-group

project, they pause to review what social skills they used, and list the ones that need improvement next time around. The addition of a student learning log for each subject, with time regularly set aside for responding to well-structured teacher prompts, builds reflection into the day and moves students to a new level of thinking. Inviting students to create yearlong work portfolios is an even broader way to make reflection part of the routine work of school, as students collect and comment upon their best pieces of work, perhaps sharing them with parents or peers.

**T**he aim of most classroom assessments should be to guide student learning and inform upcoming teaching.

Reflective thinking applies to teachers, too. It is not enough to assess kids through quizzes and tests, compiling points that yield numerical or letter grades. Instead, the aim of most classroom assessments should be to guide student learning and inform upcoming teaching. This means teachers carefully observe learners, using guides or rubrics to structure their observations. They hold regular one-to-one student conferences and engage in written exchanges with students. They collect and study student work—not just to red-mark errors, but to find evidence of learning in progress and then determine the most appropriate next steps for each learner.

**INTERACTIVE: In interactive classrooms, teachers tap into the primal power of social relations to promote learning.** Search the term *classroom* on Google Images, and what do you mostly find? Pictures of children arranged in straight rows looking forward toward a teacher. Or search *teacher*, and you get countless images of an adult holding forth in a room of silent, passive listeners. How deeply this image is ingrained our psyches! And yet how contrary to the kind of learning that engages kids' interest. Most people find that working with others brings energy to learning, and decades of research backs up this assumption: kids benefit when they learn, talk, think, write, research, debate, and perform together. But young people are not necessarily born (or raised) to work together efficiently in an interdependent community. That means teachers have to build those relationships intentionally and explicitly, early in the year, and work to maintain them throughout.

**Classrooms should be SOCIABLE work environments.** Friendliness and support characterize the atmosphere of high-functioning classrooms (or workplaces, or families). People enjoy learning together, they feel safe, and disputes or put-downs are rare. To create this low-risk climate, Best Practice teachers understand that they are in the friendship-building business. Their standard is “everyone works with everyone in this classroom.” That means nobody can say, “I won’t work with her [him/them].”

But, of course, not all students arrive in a classroom knowing or liking each other, and unless acquaintance is built early and solidly among all class mem-

bers, then stereotypes, suppositions, prejudices, or rumors can come to rule relationships. What works in our favor is that *people like people they know*. If kids get to know each other, more often than not they will like each other. So, thoughtful teachers infuse acquaintance-building activities in the opening weeks of school, making sure that every student repeatedly works with every other student in the room. This friendship-building business especially applies to high school kids, even if a teacher has six classes a day. The time spent building interpersonal relationships and group esprit pays off big-time as the year unfolds. Imagine a secondary classroom where put-downs have been systematically ruled out of the game: the chances of kids engaging with the work and taking risks as learners increase exponentially.

***Some of the most efficient learning activities are COLLABORATIVE.*** When we think of the social side of learning, we most readily envision group discussions, kids listening to one another's ideas, carrying out projects and writing letters and stories *for* one another. Collaborative learning also promotes children's learning *with and from* one another. The American workplace requires extensive collaboration and group problem solving, not just competitiveness and isolation. Collaborative small-group activity has proven an especially effective mode for school learning—and solid achievement gains have been documented across the curriculum by Darling-Hammond et al. (2008), Johnson and Johnson (1998), Sharan (1999), and others.

Collaborative work allows learners to receive much more extensive support and feedback than they can ever get from a single teacher who must spread his time among all students. Of course, group work requires training students and carefully designing meaningful, authentic activities—otherwise, the result can be inefficient and shallow. But cooperation works very well when teachers employ the training techniques that have been refined in recent years. And habitual cooperation pays off both in time better used in the classroom and, later on, as a valuable skill in life. As a recent study showed, people who develop good collaboration skills before leaving school go on to make more money than their classmates—and one's "collaboration IQ" is a better predictor of lifetime earnings than any standardized test score (ScienceDaily 2008)!

***Classrooms can become more effective and productive when procedures are DEMOCRATIC.*** It is a classic bit of American hypocrisy that we claim to be a democracy and yet send our children off to profoundly authoritarian schools. But even if we don't choose to democratize schools as a matter of principle, there are instructional reasons for doing so. Democratic processes can make learning more efficient, more widely spread throughout the classroom, and more likely to have lifelong effects. First and most important, children need to

**A**s a recent study showed . . . one's "collaboration IQ" is a better predictor of lifetime earnings than any standardized test score!

exercise *choice*—choice in books they read, topics they write about, and activities they focus on during some parts of the day. This means that teachers must help children learn how to make intelligent choices, not just arbitrary ones or choices of avoidance. When children learn to make good choices, not only are they more committed to their work, they also acquire habits that make them lifelong readers, writers, and learners of math, science, and social issues—and, not inconsequentially, active, critical, involved citizens.

But democracy is not just freedom to choose. In a genuinely democratic classroom, children learn to negotiate conflicts so they work together more effectively and appreciate one another's differences. They learn that they are part of a larger community, and just as they can gain from it, they must also sometimes give to it. They hear about differences in one another's cultures, religions, regional backgrounds, and personal beliefs. Too often, this valuing of community within difference is missing in both rich and poor neighborhoods, and its absence undercuts education in countless ways, leaving us with discipline problems, bullying, vandalism, hostility toward school, and low self-esteem among students. Democracy in the classroom is not just a frill or an isolated social studies unit, but an educational necessity.

Even with young children, Best Practice teachers are careful not to inculcate daylong dependency on teacher instructions, directions, and decisions. They see their overriding goal as nurturing children's capacity to run their own brains, conduct their own inquiries, track and evaluate their own efforts. So they expect students to take considerable responsibility—to establish learning goals, monitor their own learning, apply the abilities they've acquired, keep their own records, and select new projects when they're finished with something, rather than just fill in an extra ditto sheet. As students gradually assume more responsibilities, the teacher provides a safe space for experimenting with newer and more difficult tasks, adding challenges as kids are ready for them. In the rigorous classes where these approaches abound, kids rise to the challenge.

## THE BALANCED CLASSROOM

Throughout the coming chapters you will find vignettes from many real teachers and real classrooms. It is tempting, as one reads any book about good instruction, to be excessively impressed by innovative, highly wrought, teacher-designed activities, implicitly assuming that increased student learning comes mainly from increased teacher doing. But it's not that simple. There must always be a balance in the classroom between teacher-organized activity and children's own initiative and self-directed work. It is during kids' self-sponsored activities that much of the most powerful learning occurs and the effects of good teaching

get a chance to bloom. During the buzz and talk that goes on while small groups work, during the jotting and quiet of journal time, during the children's play with math manipulatives or puzzles, while kids sketch out ideas on a piece of butcher paper—so much learning is happening that even when there's a bit of digressing and fooling around, an observer gets dizzy watching it.

As another way of making clear this special kind of artful, balanced teaching, we have created the chart “Indicators of Best Practice,” which also appears on the inside front cover. This graphic delineates eight areas—physical facilities, classroom climate/management, student voice and responsibility, language and communication, activities and assignments, student work and assessment, teacher attitude and outlook—that directly affect the teacher-student dynamic. The elements within these areas are not either/or practices. They are on a continuum that represents how, as teachers move toward the kind of instruction described in this book, the characteristics of their teaching will change and develop in many dimensions.

Whatever your purpose as a reader, we urge you to view the recommendations and classroom stories in this book as elements of a process of professional growth and not as examples of perfection. School districts or individual teachers rarely advance in one single, straight-line jump. None of the teachers whose classrooms are described here consider themselves paragons; all talk about being somewhere in the middle of a long, complex journey. Indeed, it is a defining characteristic of good teachers that they are learners themselves, constantly observing to see what enriches children's experience—and what makes teaching more invigorating and rewarding. Thoughtful readers will find many ways to improve upon and extend the activities described here. In fact, as we've talked with these teachers, we've usually ended up brainstorming additional options and variations that bring even more principles of Best Practice into play. We certainly invite our readers to join in this process of extending and fine-tuning.

## SO WHAT'S NEW?

This family of ideas, the model we now call Best Practice teaching, will be quite familiar to anyone who worked in American schools during the late 1960s and early 1970s—someone raised on the ideas of Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, James Britton, James Moffett, Jerome Bruner, Erik Erikson, Carl Rogers, Jerome Harste, John Holt, Herbert Kohl, Neil Postman, and Charles Weingartner. But then this list doesn't exactly hold any surprises for people who lived through the progressive era of the 1930s or who have studied the work of John Dewey. Yes, today's “new” integrated and holistic educational paradigm can fairly be called a continuation of progressive thinking.

However, while it is harmonious with and descended from past progressive eras, Best Practice is not identical to “whole language” in the 1980s, or to the “open classrooms” of the 1960s, or to the Deweyian schools of the 1930s. Though still rooted in the view of children as fundamentally good, self-regulating, and trustworthy, today’s movement is driven by more than an optimistic conception of children’s nature. This time around, the philosophical orientation is better balanced with pedagogical pragmatism and insight about cognition. We are blending a positive view of young people with our commitment to meaningful curriculum content and our improved understanding of how learning works. In earlier times, some progressive innovations failed because they were backed with more passion than practical, well-thought-out procedures for implementing them. Now, we return to the same basic theories, with the same beliefs about kids’ capabilities, but equipped with much better ideas about how adult helpers can make them work.

*Throughout America’s history, there have always been parents and educators who wanted schools to be engaging, lifelike, animated places where kids’ curiosity was respected.*

So, yes, many of the ideas in this book are old and familiar. Best Practice is the furthest thing from a fad. Throughout America’s history, there have always been parents and educators who wanted schools to be engaging, lifelike, animated places where kids’ curiosity was respected. In the 1830s, Horace Mann, often honored as the “father of American education,” advocated for free public education for all children, with equal schooling for boys and girls; a curriculum that stressed practical, real-life subjects; and a pedagogy built upon kids’ curiosity rather than the harsh discipline typical at that time. Indeed, progressive education in the United States has been just as “traditional” as having kids silently do seatwork or take machine-scored tests. There’s a dynamic in our culture, an ongoing debate about how best to educate the young. Whatever the era, some people always seem to think that tight control of students and the transmission of content are the correct path. Others recognize the powerful abilities children bring to the classroom, and want to build curriculum around experience, collaboration, and active doing. This latter model, which we now call Best Practice, has been competing for acceptance in American culture for many generations.

Now this model of teaching appears again, this time in a stronger, more coherent form. Perhaps the current cycle of Best Practice innovation will have an even deeper impact on education than the innovations of the 1960s and 1980s, or even the era of John Dewey. While the authors of this book have no doubt that cyclical variations will continue into future generations, we also believe in progress. With each cycle, some things change that never change back, and some cycles leave a stronger heritage than others. We believe that today’s is potentially the most important, powerful, and enduring phase of educational renewal ever to occur in American schools.

# THE BIGGER PICTURE

This book is definitely concerned with improving the teaching and learning in American schools, which we think is urgently important. But we do not agree with today's screaming headlines and shrill pundits, who relentlessly promote the idea that this country's educational system is in catastrophic decline. Much of the data that feeds this sky-is-falling mentality comes from international test score comparisons in which U.S. schools fare poorly. But contrary to what you may have read, there is another side to the story.

Sure, poor teachers do exist in this country, and there are schools and districts that shortchange their students. But most of our schools compare favorably to the highest-scoring countries in the world. On the benchmark Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests, U.S. fifteen-year-olds score 14th of 65 in reading. That places American kids above the students in England, Germany, Sweden, Israel, and many other developed nations. But still, wait a minute. Only 14th of 65? This is America—aren't we supposed to be number one? The United States should be leading the pack, not stuck in the middle, right?

Well, if you view these international test scores in light of the general welfare of children in different countries, the results look somewhat different. For example, on a list of thirty-four developed nations, the United States had the highest infant mortality, the greatest income inequality, and highest unemployment. Further, the United States is first in the proportion of children living in poverty, first for children living with hunger, and first in the proportion of people in the penal system. Overall, the U.S. ranks 29th in the world in the care, support, and opportunity it provides to young people (Blow 2011).

And yet in spite of these challenges, somehow, American kids still rank 14th of 65 in reading. You might even call that *outperforming*. Most of the countries that outscore the United States on the PISA tests have universal child care and development services that focus intensely on children's health and development from birth onward, with special assistance devoted to immigrant families or to children speaking non-native languages. The United States, on the other hand, is a country that seems content to live with a large underclass of poor, underserved, and ill-cared-for children.

Now here is some PISA test data that's especially illuminating.

- Of all the nations participating in the PISA assessment, the United States has the largest number of students living in poverty—21.7 percent. The next closest nations are the United Kingdom and New Zealand, which have poverty rates that are 75 percent of ours.
- In U.S. schools where 10 percent or less of the pupils live in poverty, students scored *number two in the world*, behind the disaggregated Chinese province of Shanghai.

- Even in U.S. schools where between 10 and 25 percent of young people live in poverty, those kids still scored *third in the world*, behind Korea and Finland.
- American schools with a 25 to 50 percent poverty rate scored *tenth in the world*.
- Only in U.S. schools where 75 percent or more of the students live in poverty, do they score at the bottom of the rankings. (McCabe 2010)

Clearly, the United States does not have a “mediocre” educational system—but a tragically *bipolar* one. About 75 percent of our schools do quite well by international standards, while the other quarter of schools, where concentrations of poor children are gathered, struggle perennially. Only when you average these two disparate pools of test scores can you get a number that can be misread (or misrepresented) as “mediocrity.” A recent U.S. Department of Education Report elaborated on this phenomenon, explaining that the notorious “achievement gap” in U.S. schools is caused by an “opportunity gap” that inexplicably still exists for poor children and children of color in America’s schools (Shah 2011).

Let us be clear: we are no apologists for poor teaching or ineffective schools. With our combined 130 years of teaching, nothing makes our blood boil faster than observing a teacher who doesn’t care, or visiting a school that doesn’t try. We get very nervous when we see students failing to acquire knowledge, doing mindless worksheets, or practicing superficial test-gaming strategies. But, to be honest, we see this very rarely. Last year, between us, we worked with kids and teachers in twenty-five states, and almost invariably we encountered sincere and dedicated educators doing their level best for the kids in their care.

Nor do we believe that children who happen to come from poor families or communities cannot learn powerfully and well. But the simple reality is that these kids’ experiences do not match the curricular domains and expectations of school as well as those of middle class students. We are not talking about a cultural gap or a racial gap—but a *background knowledge gap*. This, of course, can be made up over time by skillful and dedicated teachers. But unfortunately, students in America’s poorest schools are twice as likely to be taught by novice or ineffective teachers (Sanders and Rivers 1996).

So, forget the hyperventilated headlines: America’s schools are not failing wholesale. Every day, the great majority of our three-million-member teacher corps are reaching and engaging students, helping them to build knowledge and love learning. But the system still shortchanges far too many kids. There’s ample evidence that students in lower-performing schools are far more likely to be offered a passive, dumbed-down, skill-and-drill curriculum. So, in addition to addressing the issues of poverty, which underlie poor performance in so many cases, we have to start *today* to ensure Best Practice teaching for every single student in every American school.

**W**e are not talking about a cultural gap or a racial gap—but a background knowledge gap.



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# Indicators of Best Practice

This chart illustrates movement from a teacher-directed to a student-centered classroom. Growth along this continuum does not mean complete abandonment of established instructional approaches. Instead, teachers add new alternatives to a widening repertoire of choices, allowing them to move among a richer array of activities, creating a more diverse and complex balance.

## **CLASSROOM SETUP:** *Promotes Student Collaboration*

- *Setup for teacher-centered instruction (separate desks) ▶ Student-centered arrangement (tables)*
- *Rows of desks ▶ Varied learning spaces for whole-class, small-group, and independent work*
- *Bare, unadorned space ▶ Commercial decorations ▶ Student-made artwork, products, displays of work*
- *Few materials ▶ Textbooks and handouts ▶ Varied resources (books, magazines, artifacts, manipulatives, etc.)*

## **CLASSROOM CLIMATE:** *Actively Involves Students*

- *Management by consequences and rewards ▶ Order maintained by engagement and community*
- *Teacher creates and enforces rules ▶ Students help set and enforce norms*
- *Students are quiet, motionless, passive, controlled ▶ Students are responsive, active, purposeful, autonomous*
- *Fixed student grouping based on ability ▶ Flexible grouping based on tasks and choice*
- *Consistent, unvarying schedule ▶ Predictable but flexible time usage based on activities*

## **VOICE AND RESPONSIBILITY:** *Are Balanced Between Teacher- and Student-Directed*

- *Teacher relies solely on an established curriculum ▶ Some themes and inquiries are built from students' own questions ("negotiated curriculum")*
- *Teacher chooses all activities ▶ Students often select inquiry topics, books, writing topics, audiences, etc.*
- *Teacher directs all assignments ▶ Students assume responsibility, take roles in decision making, help run classroom life*
- *Whole-class reading and writing assignments ▶ Independent reading (SSR, reading workshop, or book clubs) and independent writing (journals, writing workshop)*
- *Teacher assesses, grades, and keeps all records ▶ Students maintain their own records, set own goals, self-assess*

## **LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION:** *Deepen Learning*

- *Silence ▶ Purposeful noise and conversation*
- *Short responses ▶ Elaborated discussion ▶ Students' own questions and evaluations*
- *Teacher talk ▶ Student-teacher talk ▶ Student-student talk plus teacher conferring with students*
- *Talk and writing focus on: Facts ▶ Skills ▶ Concepts ▶ Synthesis and reflection*



### **ACTIVITIES AND ASSIGNMENTS:** *Balance the Traditional and More Interactive*

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- *Teacher presents material ► Students read, write, and talk every day ► Students actively experience concepts*
- *Whole-class teaching ► Small-group instruction ► Wide variety of activities, balancing individual work, small groups, and whole-class activities*
- *Uniform curriculum for all ► Jigsawed curriculum (different but related topics according to kids' needs or choices)*
- *Light coverage of wide range of subjects ► Intensive, deep study of selected topics*
- *Short-term lessons, one day at a time ► Extended activities; multiday, multistep projects*
- *Isolated subject lessons ► Integrated, thematic, cross-disciplinary inquiries*
- *Focus on memorization and recall of facts ► Focus on applying knowledge and problem solving*
- *Short responses, fill-in-the-blank exercises ► Complex responses, evaluations, writing, performances, artwork*
- *Identical assignments for all ► Differentiated curriculum for all styles and abilities*

### **STUDENT WORK AND ASSESSMENT:** *Inform Teachers, Students, Parents*

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- *Products created for teachers and grading ► Products created for real events and audiences*
- *Classroom/hallway displays: No student work posted ► "A" papers only ► All students represented*
- *Identical, imitative products displayed ► Varied and original products displayed*
- *Teacher feedback via scores and grades ► Teacher feedback and conferences are substantive and formative*
- *Products are seen and rated only by teachers ► Public exhibitions and performances are common*
- *Data kept private in teacher gradebook ► Work kept in student-maintained portfolios*
- *All assessment by teachers ► Student self-assessment an official element ► Parents are involved*
- *Standards set during grading ► Standards available in advance ► Standards codeveloped with students*

### **TEACHER ATTITUDE AND OUTLOOK:** *Take Professional Initiative*

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#### **Relationship with students is:**

- *Distant, impersonal, fearful ► Positive, warm, respectful, encouraging*
- *Judging ► Understanding, empathizing, inquiring, and guiding*
- *Directive ► Consultative*

#### **Attitude toward self is:**

- *Powerless worker ► Risk taker/experimenter ► Creative, active professional*
- *Solitary adult ► Member of team with other adults in school ► Member of networks beyond school*
- *Staff development recipient ► Director of own professional growth*

#### **View of role is:**

- *Expert, presenter, gatekeeper ► Coach, mentor, model, guide*





*Chapter 4*

# Best Practice *in*

## Writing

Jessica Lopez-Rosario's second graders at McAuliffe School, in a predominantly Mexican-American Chicago neighborhood, enter Room 107 to find on the chalkboard a gentle not-quite assignment about connecting their writing with their science unit:

Hey! Maybe some students would like to do a sea animal poem. You could write a poem about the animal you are researching! How many of you think you can give it a try today during morning work?

—*Your teacher, Mrs. L-R*

Not surprisingly, most of the kids eagerly get to work on this, while Jessica moves around the room, conferring with individual students. She recently taught a brief mini-lesson on line breaks in poems and now helps kids with this step as needed. She encourages the first student to read her poem aloud to see how it sounds, to locate possible line breaks. Then the girl draws lines between words in a second poem to choose her line breaks. "Yes, you've got it!" Jessica declares as she stands up to move on to another child.

The next kid is stuck, with nothing written, which calls for a different intervention: “OK, just tell me about it. Where were you? Playing tag in the park? . . . OK, write it down just like you told me. First get your ideas on paper. After that you can arrange them into a poem.”

After about fifteen minutes of writing and conferring the kids move to the rug, where Jessica conducts a mini-lesson on a writing skill. She proceeds to explain:

Good morning writers! [Good morrrrrning Mrs. Lopez-Rosario!] Yesterday we talked about showing instead of just telling. Rather than just saying, “She was very sad,” you can describe your character looking down at her feet with her mouth turned way down at the corners. But I noticed that some people are still trying to figure out how to use this in their writing. So to help you, we’ll read a story that shows us how to do this.

Jessica and special education teacher Amy Hegener take turns reading from the book *The Way I Feel*, by Janan Cain. While this is a book about feelings (obviously), the teacher uses this “mentor text” to help students recognize the effectiveness of active descriptions of each feeling instead of just naming them. After each feeling is described, the kids “turn and talk” with a neighbor to discuss the answer before the feeling is stated.

The conclusion of the mini-lesson then aims to help make sure the kids begin to incorporate the strategy in their writing. Jessica instructs: “If you’re not sure that you are showing-not-telling, you can read your poem to someone else. Remember, *you’re all writing teachers in this class!*”

The kids head off to their seats for more writing, and Jessica moves out into the room once more to help individuals who need it.

There are plenty of writing-oriented materials around the room from brainstorming and mini-lessons during the year:

- a chart listing “mood” words
- a list of basic punctuation marks
- a chart describing revision strategies—reread, check for capitals and punctuation, underline the first word of each sentence, and change any words that are frequently repeated
- a sample poem on a chart, with labels for various features like line breaks and rhymes
- a word wall with words from the science unit
- a collection of students’ writing, titled “Authors’ Celebration,” displaying essays about family—personal, but explanatory in nature

There’s plenty of writing going on all year long in Room 107—and in fact in every classroom throughout the school, because the teachers have decided

it's high priority. After several weeks orienting students to writing workshop procedures, the second-grade teachers lead eight writing units on various types of writing during the rest of the year, with at least two published pieces for each unit. Workshop runs forty minutes per day, five days a week, including oral sharing several times each week and an authors' celebration at the end of each unit.

Jessica started implementing writers workshop just two years ago. In the winter of that year, the school organized an Instructional Leadership Team, with coaching help from a Chicago school network group called the Partnership for Instructional Leadership and training by Jeff Nelsen of Targeted Leadership Consulting. The team decided, after input from all the teachers, to focus on building writers workshop into everyone's teaching, using a carefully planned step-by-step approach so as not to overwhelm people. Jessica explains that this year's start-up went much more smoothly than last because her second graders had already experienced workshop. She reflects on her own professional learning:

What *was* I doing before I implemented writers workshop? . . . My writing instruction was something like that, but not nearly as interactive, and not as much sharing took place. Kids didn't do as many different types of writing, and they weren't writing as much as they could or as well as they could. It was more one-size-fits-all. However, I was fitting in more writing in the content areas, and now I'm looking to reconnect with that.

On the day we've described, that certainly was happening as science met poetry.

## A LOOK AT THE WRITING STANDARDS

Over the past thirty-five years, research on writing has blossomed to create a clear picture of the kind of effective writing strategies found in Jessica Lopez-Rosario's classroom. And as you'll see below, Jessica makes use of almost every one of the principles outlined in this chapter. George Hillocks summarized the early work on these strategies in *Research on Written Composition* (1986). Later, these ideas were affirmed in *Standards for the English Language Arts*, by the IRA and the NCTE (1996), the twelve main principles of which appear in Chapter 3. For writing, the principles emphasize real audiences, students' own authentic purposes for writing, and the need for students to learn a wide range of writing strategies. These practices are elaborated in the NCTE's *Standards in Practice*, which describe primary, intermediate, middle school, and high school class-



rooms where writing was integrated into literacy education (Crafton 1996; Sierra-Perry 1996; Smagorinsky 1996; Wilhelm 1996). The principles have since been applied and elaborated by Nancie Atwell (2007), Lucy Calkins (2003, 2006), JoAnn Portalupi and Ralph Fletcher (2004), Regie Routman (2005), Tony Stead and Linda Hoyt (2011), Ruth Culham (2003) and many others.

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) represent a somewhat different approach (CCSS Initiative 2010). From the start we should understand that these new standards were written as “outcomes,” knowledge and skills that students are to demonstrate at each grade level. They are not intended to provide guidance on instruction or the processes by which students learn or produce such outcomes. Previous standards, such as those created by NCTE and IRA, were more explicit about the purposes for each item, along with ways for teachers to promote them and for students to learn and apply them. Educators might well be thankful that their professional work is not more tightly dictated, and in its introduction, the CCSS document claims this as a virtue. Good teachers will still be able to inspire and excite their students to strive for excellence and engage them in meaningful writing and learning.

***What’s new in these writing standards?*** The introduction describes a successful student as an independent learner, “engaged and open-minded—but discerning”—certainly a meaningful goal. The standards then address three types of writing: argument, informative/explanatory texts, and narratives of real or imagined experiences—a reasonable range, though clearly much more focused on nonfiction writing than many classrooms have been in the past. This will call for kids to think more extensively about the evidence they provide to support their ideas, and the information they gather to explain complex topics. Characteristics for each type of writing grow in sophistication up the grades. Separate language standards cover conventions, “knowledge of language,” and vocabulary.

Along with elements of the various types of writing (i.e., introduction, logically ordered reasons or facts, transitions, conclusions), the standards include some important larger essentials. For example, experts (Graves, Calkins, Atwell, Fletcher) have stressed for decades that good writers think hard about the purpose and audience for their writing. So the Common Core Standard 4 for writing states that development, organization, and style must be “appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.” Standard 5, on some elements of the writing process, introduces the needs of an audience, though only starting in seventh grade. And Standard 10 calls for “a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, and audiences.” The standards are readily available online, so we won’t attempt to describe them in greater detail.

**The limitations.** Along with many other experienced educators and researchers, however, we find several major limitations to these standards, and they fall into three main categories:

1. Lack of connection between the specific writing skills and structures listed in the standards and the larger communicative purposes they are meant to serve—resulting in a rather mechanical and unengaging picture of writing that is surprisingly like the isolated set of skills that has too often dominated writing instruction in schools.
2. Lack of recognition of the importance of voice and engagement in writing. Much communication in the wider world (except for documents like computer manuals, for example) depends on catching and holding a reader’s attention. References to style and “reader interest” mentioned under “Effective Language Use” in the penultimate draft of the standards were eliminated for K–8 in the final version. And most of the elements of the types of writing describe rather bland, dutiful, and very traditionally organized products.
3. Absence of research-based understandings about the steps and stages students move through as they learn to write—resulting in the introduction of some skills too early, others too late; some at too low a level and others exceedingly unrealistic.

The first concern is reflected not in any one particular standard, but in the document’s structure. Standard 4, for example, focuses on “clear and coherent writing in which the development and organization are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience”—recognizing larger purposes. But the standards outlining the characteristics of good argument, informational, and narrative writing make no explicit connection to that larger perspective. The various elements can certainly support such purposes, but standing alone they appear as absolutes, to be taught because an authority says they’re important, rather than embedded in real communication that can make them relevant. Nowhere is it ever stated that writing should be created for and sent to any real audiences, or that student choice about these things matters.

The second concern is reflected in the very limited set of elements provided for each type of writing. For informative pieces at every grade level, the topic is to be neatly introduced and the direction of the essay clearly previewed. No surprises are contemplated, and no starting in the midst of a lively scene, though these are preferred strategies throughout much of the literate world. Instead, the requirement very much resembles the old five-paragraph theme pattern (“First I’m going to tell you about . . .”) that persists in some schools but nowhere else in the universe of good written communication.

Finally, it’s just not clear what model of language development guides the timing for various skills. Explicit attention to the needs of an audience, as we

noted, first appears at seventh grade. In our experience, far younger students are able to think about and work on this issue, and Portalupi and Fletcher's *Non-fiction Craft Lessons* (2001) introduces it at the earliest grades. Or, for another example, why are fifth graders expected to use commas to separate items in a series, while fourth graders don't need to learn this yet? Generally, good teachers introduce these skills as they arise in the writing kids do, so that they are practiced and learned through actual, repeated use. What's important to avoid is a collection of disconnected grammar lessons that do not relate to the kinds of communication that students are attempting. Otherwise students simply do not internalize the skills.

As a result, the Common Core writing standards include much repetition from grade to grade, and some items are even starred, to be retaught in later grades. Of course, such reteaching has taken place year after year in many classrooms, eating up time that could otherwise be spent moving students further toward excellence. The standards do include charts showing a progression of skills—and these could provide the cornerstone for schoolwide planning, if they were made more central to the document.

***What teachers can do.*** In sum, the Standards provide only a partial picture of good writing instruction. They focus on products we can see and measure, what the designers hope students can ultimately *do*. The one virtue of this is that too often, professional texts and staff development workshops have said more about what *teachers* should do than what *kids* actually accomplish. What these standards don't address, and what teachers can productively focus on, is the work of actually leading students to learn and produce good writing, and to carry their skills forward for "college and career readiness"—which is the standards' stated goal. Unfortunately, the standards are written in a way that seems to encourage the old skill-and-drill approach to writing instruction. But they needn't be used that way. Instead, we can make sure we don't simply march students mechanically through the various skills. We can build engaging, real-world activities that involve kids with the audiences and purposes for which they are writing, and connect the skills enumerated in the standards to these. We can teach brainstorming and drafting and revising techniques through which those writing skills and structures are created and strengthened. We can observe and confer with individual students, determine their stage of learning, and introduce the next appropriate challenge and skill. And we can support student choice among topics and genres, gradually guiding kids to widen their writing experience, so that all types of writing—including but not limited to those listed in the standards—are explored without turning them into empty exercises.

**W**e can build engaging, real-world activities that involve kids with the audiences and purposes for which they are writing, and connect the skills enumerated in the standards to these.

These are things that Jessica Lopez-Rosario is doing in her classroom. She uses the standards as one aspect of her teaching, rather than being limited by them, observing her students' work for their progress on various standards and planning her instruction accordingly. As a result, the kids become enthusiastic, successful writers who score well on the tests. And this is what teachers can do as outlined in the standards for great writing instruction in this chapter.

As the standards efforts continue, two consortia are developing new computer-based assessments that reflect the standards and are intended to be used nationwide. Along with the U.S. Department of Education, the Gates Foundation has been funding the development of such tools, student assignments, and tests “to make higher standards real in classrooms” (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation 2009). However, test designers themselves have warned that serious technical issues were being encountered, work had slowed, and truly revolutionary assessments probably will not be operational until several years after the planned 2014 rollout (*Education Week* April 20, 2011). Meanwhile, we're told that the high-stakes tests will continue to look very much like ones in use today. We'll see how this all unfolds. For now, teachers and districts can use the Common Core Standards judiciously, as indicators of some, but not all, of the aspects of writing that good writers need to learn. And educators should consult the many powerful research studies and professional texts developed over the past several decades for the strategies that actually guide students to learn to write well.

## QUALITIES OF BEST PRACTICE IN TEACHING WRITING

Two major recent reports assembled the evidence from many studies (the research method called *meta-analysis*) on the strategies that improve students' writing. Sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation, these reports—*Writing Next*, by Steve Graham and Dolores Perin (2007), and *Writing to Read*, by Graham and Michael Hebert (2010)—confirm what good teachers and education experts have long known. *Writing Next* pinpoints a number of powerful teaching approaches that make a difference, including:

- Instructing students on planning, revising, and editing compositions.
- Engaging students in prewriting activities.
- Conducting inquiry activities that lead to writing.
- Having students write collaboratively.
- Having students read models for writing.
- Using writing for learning content.

Just about every one of these could be seen in the second-grade classroom we visited at the start of this chapter. *Writing to Read* further confirms that writing increases students' reading comprehension in three ways:

- writing about subject-area texts they read
- learning writing skills and processes that go into creating a published text
- increasing the amount of writing students do

The following qualities of Best Practice elaborate and add to these important lists.

***All children can and should write.*** A preschooler recites a story from her “pretend” writing and later repeats it nearly word for word, as her parents admire her “cute” behavior. Recognizing constancy of meaning in written symbols shows that this child is already practicing literacy. Most children write long before they reach kindergarten. They make meaningful marks on paper, starting with drawings and moving through imitation writing to more conventional messages.

Children of all backgrounds bring to school extensive involvement in literacy, though the cultural patterns of language use vary widely—not just in grammar or pronunciation, but also in purposes and occasions for talk. Just as Jessica Lopez-Rosario starts her day with one-on-one conferences to help individual kids, teachers must build on children's strengths and then help widen their repertoires. It is vital to listen to children and learn their particular language abilities and needs, rather than assume that the teachers' own language styles and customs are universal.

Writing should not wait for reading or grammar to develop first; as recent research has confirmed, generating written language is one of children's prime paths to reading achievement. So kids need sufficient time to complete and reflect on communicative tasks.

***Help students find real purposes to write and real audiences to reach.***

*In Alicia Rosenberg's third-grade bilingual classroom at McAuliffe School, the kids are researching and creating animal books as a project for their science unit on desert food chains. Alicia observes that some teachers think students in bilingual classes can't do much writing, but she finds that if she breaks the work down into more discrete steps using her writer's workshop mini-lessons, they dive right into it. Now they are reading their drafts aloud to each other, and the children say that this project is one of their favorites. We notice, too, that one of the charts on the wall lists strategies for identifying topics to write about, the most prominent being “things that matter to us.”*

When the topic matters, children work hard and invest time and effort in crafting their work. The best language learning occurs when students attempt

**C**hildren of all backgrounds bring to school extensive involvement in literacy.

actual communication and see how real listeners/readers react. Meaningful writing tasks bridge the cognitive demands of school and the issues of students' cultures and personalities. Further, arbitrarily assigned topics with no opportunity for choice deprive students of practice in a most crucial step of writing—making the first decision about what to write.

Publication of writing is vital for fulfilling these purposes: making bound books, cataloging student works in the school library, and displaying products in classrooms, school hallways, local libraries, neighborhood stores, and local dentists' waiting rooms. When the teacher is the only audience, students are robbed of the rich and diverse audience responses that build a writer's skills and motivation.

***Help students exercise choice, take ownership, and assume responsibility.*** It's simple. The more choices teachers make, the fewer the responsibilities left for students. For a significant percentage of writing activities, students should choose their own topics. They can learn to look critically at their work, decide which pieces are worth continued effort, and set their own goals.

***Yes, but . . .*** *many students don't have enough knowledge about what makes good writing. Without this, how can they make good choices of their own?*

When students take ownership of their writing, there's actually much more teaching than before, but it's more focused on higher-level thinking, and on specific needs as these arise in their writing. Teaching techniques to promote real authorship and decision making include:

- modeling topic selection and self-evaluation processes using anonymous samples or the teacher's own writing
- brief one-to-one conferences in which the teacher asks questions that help both student and teacher understand what the student is trying to say, and then briefly teaching one skill most relevant to the writing—rather than the teacher taking over as an editor
- small-group collaborative work and peer responses, with students working together constructively, asking each other thoughtful questions about what the writer is trying to say—rather than acting as editors

***Provide opportunities for students to experience the complete writing process.*** Many children never see skillful writers at work and are unaware that writing is a staged, craftlike process that competent authors typically break into manageable steps such as the following:

- selecting or becoming involved in a topic, finding a purpose for writing, and clarifying the audience
- prewriting—considering an approach, gathering thoughts or information, mapping plans, free-writing ideas

- drafting—organizing material and getting words down
- revising—further developing ideas and clarifying their expression
- editing—polishing meaning and proofreading for publication

Teachers can help children recognize that the process varies between individuals and between writing tasks. However, just as with other crafts, not all pieces are worth carrying through all stages, and children can learn by focusing on just one or two stages for a given piece. If they revise and edit just their best pieces, their work will more likely reflect real effort.

***Help students get started.*** Support begins from the very start. Children can be helped to develop abundant ideas about self-chosen or teacher-assigned topics. Lists of topics and questions in students’ folders or on wall charts help kids get started on their own. Skillful teachers conduct many kinds of prewriting activities:

- memory searches
- listing, charting, webbing, and clustering of raw ideas
- drawing and sketching
- group brainstorming
- free-writing (a specific process for probing thoughts)
- discussion in pairs, small groups, and the whole class
- reading and research on questions students generate

***Guide students as they draft and revise.*** Jessica Lopez-Rosario taught her students about line breaks in poetry, helped them with that step in conferences, and then explored a further skill—“showing, not just telling”—through a read-aloud. For these second graders, revising writing is a regular activity. They’ve learned to ask each other lots of questions about the stage the writing is at and the help the writer seeks *before* discussing any possible revisions in a piece.

Successive stages in the writing process often are ignored in traditional approaches. But good writing usually is not created in one quick shot, so children need instruction in how to revise. Using role-plays, modeling, and group problem solving, teachers can introduce key revision processes:

- reviewing one’s work and comparing what one has said to one’s intended meaning
- seeing the words from the point of view of a reader, who may not know all that the writer knows about the topic
- studying examples from other writers to become aware of styles and strategies
- generating multiple options for expressing an idea and choosing what works best

Revision is about thinking and communication, not just fixing details. Simply telling how to fix an essay may achieve a better piece of writing, but doesn't teach the child how to revise.

**Show students how writing is created.** In conventional classrooms, teachers give writing assignments and prompts, which students are then required to fulfill. But we should make sure not to leave out a huge and important step here. Teachers need to *show* kids how to write using “write alouds.” Whatever the grade level or subject area, teachers must regularly stand in front of the class and compose new text in front of their students, projecting their words and vocalizing their thinking process as they compose. “Hmmm, now let me see, what’s the best way to get my reader engaged from the beginning?” “Oops, I’m not sure I’ve got the just-right word here.” “This section is getting kind of long, I better wrap it up.” This vital “write-aloud” modeling process is just as key to writing instruction as think-alouds are to reading. For further expert modeling, teachers can help students find and study “mentor texts,” fiction or nonfiction works by published authors that offer writing structures, patterns, or styles that young writers can emulate.

**Lead students to learn the craft of writing.** While children absorb a great deal about language through listening, talking, and reading, most also need to consciously focus on particular strategies for expressing ideas, ranging from generating ways to begin and end to options for organizing a piece, to identifying vivid details that bring ideas to life, to composing sentences clearly and with standard English conventions.

The craft of writing can be taught through brief mini-lessons focused on skills appropriate to particular writing tasks students are tackling, so the skills are practiced immediately in meaningful settings. The most effective mini-lessons will follow the Gradual Release of Responsibility model described in Chapter 2. As we observed there, this is one of the key structures effective teachers use to introduce new skills and strategies to their students. The key steps:

- Demonstration of a skill or strategy, using a write-aloud as described above, with the teacher’s composition projected on a screen as she talks her thinking about it out loud, demonstrating a particular task or struggle the students have been engaged in.
- Shared writing in which the teacher still holds the pen, but invites students to help her compose text.
- Guided practice, in which students use the modeled writing strategy individually, but with teacher support. This may take place as part of the mini-lesson or in small groups or conferences as students turn to their own tasks.



- Independent practice—when kids take responsibility for developing their own pieces of writing from scratch. As preparation for this step, Lucy Calkins (2006) advises that the teacher emphasizes the link between the strategy demonstrated and the work the students will do next.

***Confer with individual students on their writing.*** Just as important as whole-class mini-lessons are one-on-one conferences (see Chapter 2). Even when these are very brief, the individual attention makes a big impression on student learners. Moreover, they provide the best opportunity for teachers to differentiate instruction according to students' specific needs. Each student needs a folder to keep her writing, a list of goals, and a separate list of "can do" skills that she has mastered to guide both teacher and student in conferences and ensuing student work. This, of course, is a key strategy for addressing Response to Intervention (RTI) assessments of students' individual achievement levels and learning needs.

***Teach grammar and mechanics in the context of actual writing.*** Grammar work is most appropriate in the later stages of the writing process and when it is connected with writing in which students are invested. When work that writers care about is going public, they want it to look good and to succeed. In contrast, research has shown for decades (see George Hillocks' classic *Research on Written Composition*, 1986) that isolated skill-and-drill grammar lessons do not transfer to writing performance. Beginning writers in primary grades can use invented spelling, so they'll develop fluency and not waste half the period waiting for the teacher to provide the correct spelling of a word.

*Yes, but . . . if kids' errors aren't all corrected promptly, won't they develop into bad writing habits?*

First of all, most teachers agree that traditional grammar instruction and heavy correction just doesn't work. It's very time consuming for teachers, reducing the amount of writing that can be assigned, and very discouraging for students, especially for struggling writers. It's much easier for a student to see patterns in her writing when she is asked to concentrate on just one element at a time. Focused lessons—either whole class or one-on-one—can be conducted during editing, when correctness is more relevant to the effort (if, that is, the writing has a real communicative purpose and destination) and doesn't interfere with motivation or the development of ideas. Specific grammar and mechanics lessons can then cover items appropriate to the task or to observed student needs. The aim is to develop writers, rather than just to achieve perfect products. The teacher should help kids acquire skills, and not act as an editor herself.

Approached this way, grammar needs far less reteaching than we think. For one thing, while mini-lessons applying grammar and usage to actual writing can be effective, teaching of formal grammar terms and parts of speech doesn't really translate into outcomes in children's work. Further, when children get lots of practice reading, writing, and polishing final drafts for a real audience, spelling gradually moves toward conventional forms, even without direct lessons. At the same time, teachers can promote student responsibility by having students keep lists in their writing folders of grammar and mechanics elements they've mastered, and then require that kids consult these as they proofread rather than wait for a teacher's markup after the fact. This way, the lessons and learning become cumulative.

***Provide a classroom context of shared learning.***

*A teacher and three middle school writers listen to a fourth read her piece about children's challenges recuperating from injuries like a broken back. The author requests help with the ending and everyone makes weak suggestions. Finally, asked for more information about the experience described in the article, she declares, "The girl was never so happy as the day she went back to school—so I think it must take experiences like this to make kids appreciate what they have." The group cheers that she's found her conclusion—not through directives, but through supportive talk and listening.*

Building a supportive context for working collaboratively is perhaps the most important step a teacher can take to promote writing growth (Nancy Steineke's *Reading and Writing Together: Collaborative Literacy in Action*, 2002, provides excellent strategies for this). In fact, if students don't find their classroom a safe place to try new approaches and to say what they believe, even the most up-to-date techniques can fall flat. On the other hand, when students hear one another's work in a positive setting, they're eager to try new topics and learn new strategies. Listening to each other's compositions, students discover what makes writing strong.

Teachers build this interactive learning context through lessons about listening and respecting other people's ideas, and through guided practice on working responsibly in small groups. The teacher must model respect and supportive questioning in her own conferences with students as well. Then young people readily learn to help each other critique themselves and figure out their own improvements. This approach yields much more learning than does direct advice about how to "fix" a piece, because the writer experiences the actual problem solving.

***Support growth in writing for English language learners.***

*On a crisp fall morning in his Wisconsin elementary school, teacher Jeff Nielson tries something new. For the first time, he offers his third-grade students a chance to discuss a classroom topic by writing notes to a partner,*

*rather than having to speak out loud. At lunchtime, Jeff is in the faculty lounge testifying: "I got more thinking and language out of my ELL kids in 20 minutes of writing that I have heard from them in last 20 days of school!"*

Not only is it essential for students who are learning English to gain writing skills; they can also benefit greatly by using writing itself as a tool that helps them master the English language. Often with the assistance of fellow students and parents, new language learners can write their ideas and stories in both their first language and English, thereby building vocabulary by seeing the two versions side by side. Teachers like Alicia Rosenberg at McAuliffe School provide more structure on some aspects of kids' writing because they know that as the students write, they are putting a great deal of energy into using the new language skills they are acquiring, and cannot readily focus on all aspects of their writing at once. But these teachers still maintain core elements such as student choice, revising, and real audiences for writing. Bilingual and dual language experts tell us the strategies that work for our native English speakers are good for ELLs as well.

***Use writing to support learning throughout the curriculum.*** Students value writing and use it more when it supports many learning activities. Writing is, in fact, one of the best tools for learning any material because it activates thinking. Brief, ungraded writing activities can activate prior knowledge, elicit questions, build comprehension, promote discussion, and help students reflect on ideas covered.

Writing in various subjects need not absorb large amounts of time or create an impossible paper load. Brief exploratory efforts that make learning more engaging and efficient include these techniques:

- First thoughts: Two- to three-minute free-writes at the start of a unit to surface students' knowledge about the subject.
- KWL charts: What students **k**now about a topic, what they **w**ant to know (questions or wonderings), and later, what they've **l**earned.
- Admit slips and exit slips: A few sentences on an index card handed in at the *start* of class, summarizing the previous day's work or reading; or a statement of something learned (or not understood) submitted at the *end* of class.
- Stop-N-Write: Brief pauses during teacher presentations or reading periods when students jot questions, responses to ideas, or predictions about what is coming next.

Teachers can read student responses to these activities quickly to learn whether concepts are understood. Students receive a "check" for credit or, better yet, an informal written response from the teacher. (For more on several of these writing-to-learn activities, see Chapter 2.)

**R**esearch indicates that writers grow more by praise and thoughtful questions about the topic than by criticism.

**Use evaluation constructively and efficiently.** Masses of red marks on a page discourage children and don't teach revising or proofreading. Research indicates that writers grow more by praise and thoughtful questions about the topic than by criticism. (Again, George Hillocks' review of research made this clear many years ago.) Better strategies for evaluation include:

- focusing on one or two kinds of errors at a time
- brief conferences at various stages of the work
- portfolios or folder systems for evaluating writing improvement over time
- student involvement in goal setting, evaluation, and written reflection
- official grading only of selected, fully revised pieces
- along with more selective marking, a sheet in each child's folder listing skills and processes the child has learned, plus brief notes on broader aspects of growth

Such cumulative records enable individualization, help children reflect on their progress, focus on actual learning rather than just the written product, and yet maintain clear accountability for both students and teachers. Growth in writing means trying something new and probably making mistakes in the process. Students must feel trust in order to take that risk, and evaluation practices should support this necessary condition for learning.

Many schools and teachers use the "6+1 Traits of Writing" framework for evaluating writing. The 6+1 comprise ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions, and presentation (Culham 2003). This can certainly help teachers identify and teach students the various aspects and qualities that make writing effective. It's important, of course, to teach and help students apply the various skills one at a time, to introduce each one when it relates most meaningfully to the specific writing task at hand, and to always take account of the strengths and needs of individual students. And then, once we have helped kids to practice a skill in isolation, we send them right back into what David Perkins calls the "whole-game," putting *all* their skills to use in creating complete pieces of writing, at their developmental level (Perkins 2010).

**Yes, but . . .** *how can I possibly grade all these papers with kids writing so much?*

Students need to write a lot, so much that teachers couldn't possibly mark every error in every paper. However, we teachers don't need to monitor so heavily—just as a music teacher doesn't need to be present at her student's every practice session, but rather listens and comments in once-a-week lessons. And research strongly shows that traditional intensive marking of papers doesn't promote improvement in writing. It may be traditional, and it may be what parents expect, but

is simply ineffective and a waste of teachers' precious time and energy. Instead, a brief conference, or marking a sample paragraph for just one type of problem, results in more real learning. The child then takes responsibility for making the improvements in the rest of the paper. Students can periodically submit their best revised pieces for in-depth evaluation. Thus, different types of evaluation—brief/informal versus extensive/formal—are employed to suit particular purposes. Good teachers aim for learning *within the child*, not just achieving a correct manuscript.

## Writing in an Interdisciplinary High School Class

NEIL RIGLER AND KEN KRAMER

*Deerfield High School, Deerfield, Illinois*

“This is a journey of discovery for us as well as for you,” Neil Rigler explains to the American studies class he teaches with social studies teacher Ken Kramer. The kids scatter around on the floor, spreading their index cards out in rows and swirls and little clusters. Each student is working with forty to fifty cards, half holding favorite one-sentence quotations they’ve individually chosen from books they’ve read over the semester, and half bearing quotations from their own personal journal entries on these books as well as on lessons and activities during that time. This is one part of their final project/exam for the year. Neil gives them their task:

Group your cards into five or six categories, however they make sense to you, and then label the categories. The only groupings you CANNOT go by are the units that we’ve studied. You can have about twenty minutes for this. When you are finished, write a few sentences of your thoughts for each category.

The kids begin thinking hard about this task. The journal entries, and indeed the work over the year, have linked history, literature, and their own personal connections with the themes introduced by the readings, lectures, videos, and discussions. Now these are all coming together in their thoughts. One student’s categories:

- good policy for internal American politics
- good policy for foreign countries
- the government’s perspectives on war
- the soldiers’ perspectives on war
- right policy as a goal

Another student’s groupings:

- burdens
- ideas/questioning society

- consequences of time
- wants/hopes/dreams

Neil and Ken move around the room, looking over kids' shoulders and holding brief conferences with those who may be struggling. One girl moans, "I can't figure this out! Every time I put a card in one pile, I see how it also fits in another one." Coauthor Steve Zemelman, who was observing, comments, "Maybe you're thinking too hard about this," and she answers, "That's what I do with everything in my life!" Neil reassures her that however she completes it will be fine. The important thing is to be thinking about the connections and the big ideas. The student gets back to work.

When the kids are finished with this stage, Neil explains the next step. "OK, now label the cards with their category name so you can put them back in their groups later. Then shuffle them all together." As they shuffle their decks, he continues:

Now you should rearrange your cards in a sequence, a kind of story line or a way to show how each idea leads to a next one. The only sequence you CANNOT use is chronology. When you're finished, write a journal entry about what your sequence means to you.

The kids are back on the floor, and again the cards begin to form lines and patterns. Neil notes that the shapes reveal kids' individual characteristics. Sure enough, a more compulsively organized student forms up in neat rows. A more divergent thinker's arrangement looks like a big question mark. One student explains how his sequence leads from American values to violence to slavery to World War II (when African Americans in the military began to experience more freedoms), to Vietnam, to questions of morality. Another arranges his cards to show the flow between individualism and more social and governmental obligations. When students read their reflections, everyone can see the variety of ways to think about what they've studied, and to appreciate the connections between the material and their own lives and struggles.

The students can't get enough of this class. It's more work than most of their other courses, they say. But they testify that they appreciate the lively experiences, the open-ended assignments, and the valuing of their own ideas, instead of just having to psych out "what the teacher wants to hear." "They helped me learn about critical thinking," one student explains. How did they do this? "By showing us how to connect the texts to our own ideas, and always pushing us to go one step further to make more connections." This instructional style works especially well for struggling students, because they experience more ways to learn the material and find it easier to request help from one or the other of their

instructors. Yes, the class is team-taught, but it's larger than a standard class and both teachers are present for its double period, so their loads are about the same as everyone else's.

Neil learned the card strategy in his work with the Bard Institute for Writing and Thinking, though he and Ken adapted it to encompass the whole semester's work instead of focusing on just one book or issue. Much of the writing these teachers assign all year reflects a similar effort to make learning highly interactive, and to combine disciplined analysis with personal connections that bring the subject to life for adolescents. The teachers continually ask, "How does literature help you understand the history, and how does history help you understand the literature?" Instead of giving lectures or instructions about making connections, they use activities that simply enact the process. "Exploded imagery" is typical. The teachers first read a short passage aloud—the preamble to the U.S. Constitution, for example—and ask everyone to write an initial reaction. Then each student chooses a phrase from the passage as the start of a new piece of writing on the topic. Next, students write their own thoughts on it: Why did you choose this phrase? What are your personal connections with it? What does it say to you now? Finally, one of the teachers reads the passage again slowly. As students hear their phrases read, they stop the teacher and read what they've written. Voices pop up around the room, elaborating on each idea. For a final writing step, students compare their new, deeper understanding with their initial reactions. No wonder they told us they'd learned to analyze material more deeply.

About once per quarter, students write longer, more formal papers. Sometimes these are more creative. A research project, for example, is done as a blog, with entries on the various historical and literary materials they locate on their topic. They then pull these together into an online presentation that can include video clips and other multimedia materials, all linked in a package to the blog. Instead of boring periods in which students sit passively not listening to other people's presentations, everyone goes into the computer lab, browses through each other's online final products, and adds comments on the blog. The blogs are open to the public, so parents and friends can see and comment on them. The teachers especially value that the students are forced to think about this wider audience when they write. So now they have planned for students to maintain individual blogs all year, along with a class blog for which a different student provides an entry each day.



It's important to know that Neil and Ken are not lone wolves doing this kind of teaching. While there are no formal committees or grade-level team meetings at Deerfield High School, teachers share ideas regularly. In each department's teacher workspace, people hang out at their desks and talk about what they are doing, new resources they've found, new strategies they are trying. "Chaotic," Neil proudly describes it. Ken explains that history teachers' files of classroom ideas are open to all. While the teachers still see themselves individually, the sharing leads to much consistency across a department. Teachers credit each other when introducing something new in the classroom, so students recognize both the diversity and unity of the pedagogy that they experience in their school. This openness has been promoted by department chairs for many years, making it a permanent part of the professional culture of the school. While some schools need more of a structure to help teachers work together and build schoolwide impact, a professional culture like this is another way to expand Best Practice teaching and learning from isolated classrooms to a whole learning community.

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### Suggested Further Readings

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### Writing Resources on the Internet

- Ayres, Ruth, and Stacey Shubitz. Two Writing Teachers: Teaching Kids, Catching Minds, 565 Miles Apart.  
<http://twowritingteachers.wordpress.com>
- Bard College Institute for Writing and Thinking.  
<http://bard.edu/iwt/>
- Beach, Richard, Chris Anson, Lee-Ann Breuch, and Thom Swiss. Teaching Writing Using Blogs, Wikis, and Other Digital Tools.  
<http://digitalwriting.pbworks.com>
- Burke, Jim. English Companion Ning: Where English Teachers Go to Help Each Other.  
<http://englishcompanion.ning.com>
- George, Kristine O'Connell. Children's Poetry Corner. Promotes her poetry books, but also a good resource for teaching poetry.  
[www.kristinegeorge.com](http://www.kristinegeorge.com)
- Gregory, Mandy. Tips for Teachers. One teacher's ongoing effort to use writer's workshop and share the ideas she finds, borrows, or develops.  
[www.mandygregory.com](http://www.mandygregory.com)
- Hicks, Troy. Digital Writing, Digital Teaching: Integrating New Literacies into the Teaching of Writing.  
<http://hickstro.org>
- Inkspot Magazine, Lemont High School. Example of an online high school literary magazine.  
[www.lshinkspot.com](http://www.lshinkspot.com)
- International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English. ReadWriteThink. Extensive lessons on teaching writing.  
[www.readwritethink.org](http://www.readwritethink.org)
- Lesson Planet. Paid subscription site. Some lessons on writing are of good quality.  
[www.lessonplanet.com](http://www.lessonplanet.com)

National Board for Professional Teaching Standards.

[www.nbpts.org](http://www.nbpts.org)

National Council of Teachers of English.

[www.ncte.org](http://www.ncte.org)

National Writing Project.

[www.writingproject.org](http://www.writingproject.org)

Northern Nevada Writing Project. WritingFix. Extensive lessons on teaching writing.

[www.writingfix.com](http://www.writingfix.com)

Peha, Steve. Teaching That Makes Sense. Useful downloads on various aspects of teaching writing.

<http://tms.org>

Teachers and Writers Collaborative. Subscription and membership site, but selected articles from their magazine available free.

[www.twc.org](http://www.twc.org)

Teen Ink. Online and print magazine of high school writers.

[www.teenink.com](http://www.teenink.com)

21x20 Inc. Writing.com. For writers of all ages and interests; includes a “League of Young Writers” and a variety of writing activities, contests, blogs, etc.

[www.writing.com](http://www.writing.com)

# *Recommendations on Teaching* **Writing**

▲ INCREASE	▼ DECREASE
<p>Student ownership and responsibility by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• helping students learn to choose their own topics and goals for improvement</li> <li>• holding brief teacher-student conferences</li> <li>• teaching students to reflect on their own progress</li> </ul>	<p>Teacher control of decision making by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• deciding all writing topics</li> <li>• suggesting improvements without student problem-solving effort first</li> <li>• setting learning objectives without student input</li> <li>• providing instruction only through whole-class activity</li> </ul>
<p>Class time on writing whole, original pieces through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• real purposes and audiences for writing</li> <li>• instruction and support for all stages of writing</li> <li>• prewriting, drafting, revising, editing</li> </ul>	<p>Time spent on isolated drills on “subskills” of grammar, vocabulary, spelling, etc.</p> <p>Writing assignments given briefly, with no context or purpose, completed in one step</p>
<p>Writing for real audiences, publishing for the class and wider communities</p>	<p>Finished pieces read only by the teacher</p>
<p>Teacher modeling of writing—“writing aloud” as a fellow author to demonstrate</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• drafting, revising, sharing</li> <li>• writing skills and processes</li> </ul>	<p>Teacher talks about writing but never writes or shares own work</p>
<p>Learning grammar and mechanics in context, at the editing stage, and as items are needed</p>	<p>Isolated grammar lessons, given in order determined by the textbook, before writing is begun</p>
<p>Making the classroom a supportive setting, using:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• active exchange and valuing of students’ ideas</li> <li>• collaborative small-group work</li> <li>• conferences and peer critiquing that give responsibility to authors</li> </ul>	<p>Devaluation of students’ ideas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• students viewed as lacking knowledge and language abilities</li> <li>• sense of class as competing individuals</li> <li>• cooperation among students viewed as cheating, disruptive</li> </ul>
<p>Writing across the curriculum as a tool for learning</p>	<p>Writing taught only during “language arts” period</p>
<p>Constructive and efficient evaluation that involves:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• brief informal oral responses as students work</li> <li>• focus on a few errors at a time</li> <li>• thorough grading of just a few of student-selected, polished pieces</li> <li>• cumulative view of growth and self-evaluation</li> <li>• encouragement of risk taking and honest expression</li> </ul>	<p>Evaluation as a negative burden for teacher and student by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• marking all papers heavily for all errors, making teacher a bottleneck</li> <li>• editing by teacher, and only after a paper is completed, rather than having the student make improvements</li> <li>• grading punitively, focused on errors, not growth</li> </ul>

## Best Practices—English Language Learners

Our classrooms are changing. Within fifteen years, one in four K–12 students will speak a language other than English, or will speak English with significant instructional implications. Although English language learners (ELLs) come from over four hundred different language backgrounds, 76 percent are born in the United States. However, 80 percent of their parents were born outside of the United States.

Spanish speakers represent 80 percent of ELLs. Spanish speakers in the United States tend to come from lower economic and educational backgrounds than other language-minority populations. The second-largest ELL group (8 percent) consists of speakers of Asian languages (e.g., Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Laotian). These families tend to come from higher income and education levels.

It is important to understand the difference between social and academic language. Jim Cummins refers to the language skills needed in social situations (conversations outside school or asking for help in the classroom) as Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS). These social interactions take place in a meaningful social context and are not necessarily cognitively demanding. These skills take between six months and two years to develop. Problems arise when teachers or administrators determine that a child is proficient in English based only on observations of the child's social interactions. (See "BICS and CALP" at <http://iteachilearn.org/cummins/bicsscalp.html>.)

Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) is the academic language needed when following directions, describing an event in a social studies lesson, or providing the names of concepts in a science class. Academic language is more cognitively demanding.

The development of academic language is the focus of the WIDA Standards (See *WIDA ELP Standards and Resource Guide, 2007 Edition*). These standards are based on ten guiding principles of language development:

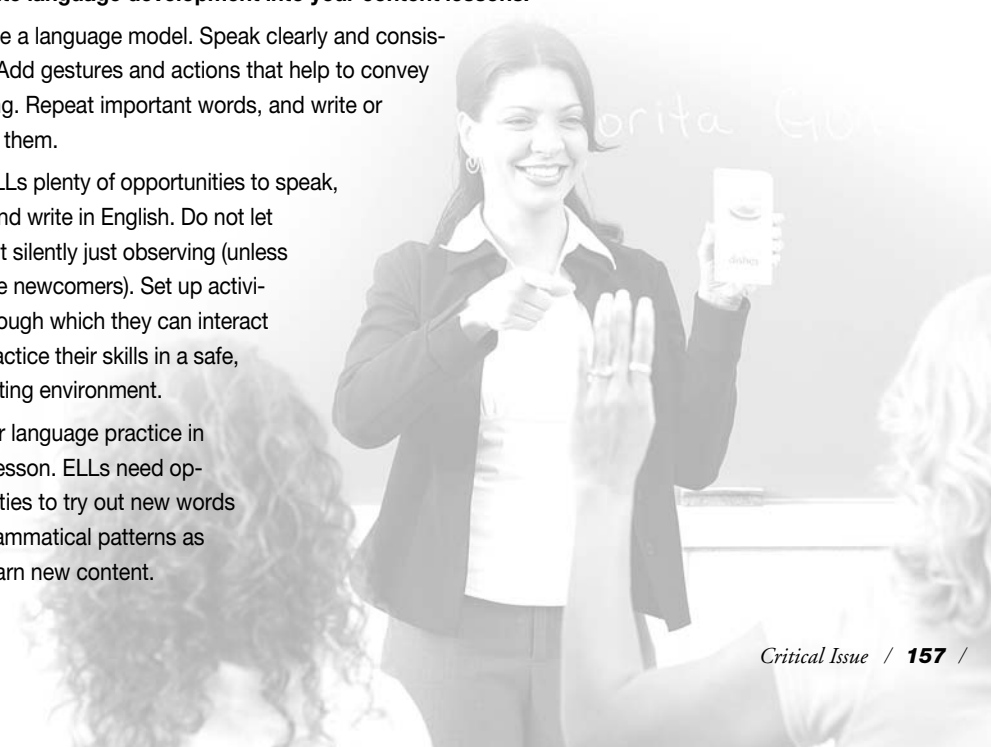
1. Students' languages and cultures are valuable resources to be tapped and incorporated into schooling.
2. Students' home and community experiences influence their language development.
3. Students draw on their metacognitive, metalinguistic, and metacultural awareness to develop proficiency in additional languages.
4. Students' academic language development in their native language facilitates their academic language development in English. Conversely, students' academic

language development in English informs their academic language development in their native language.

5. Students learn language and culture through meaningful use and interaction.
6. Students use language in functional and communicative ways that vary according to context.
7. Students develop language proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing interdependently, but at different rates and in different ways.
8. Students' development of academic language and academic content knowledge are interrelated processes.
9. Students' development of social, instructional, and academic language, a complex and long-term process, is the foundation for their success in school.
10. Students' access to instructional tasks requiring complex thinking is enhanced when linguistic complexity and instructional support match their levels of language proficiency.

Following are key suggestions for all teachers working with ELLs.

- ▶ **Get to know your ELLs.** Find out each child's level of proficiency in English, literacy skills, prior schooling, family background, and the similarity of home language and culture to that of the mainstream children.
- ▶ **Incorporate language development into your content lessons.**
  - Become a language model. Speak clearly and consistently. Add gestures and actions that help to convey meaning. Repeat important words, and write or project them.
  - Give ELLs plenty of opportunities to speak, read, and write in English. Do not let them sit silently just observing (unless they are newcomers). Set up activities through which they can interact and practice their skills in a safe, supporting environment.
  - Plan for language practice in every lesson. ELLs need opportunities to try out new words and grammatical patterns as they learn new content.



► **Provide academic scaffolding to help ELLs access content.**

- Activate kids' background knowledge. ELLs benefit from explicit connections between new content and prior knowledge.
  - Brainstorm ideas.
  - Use KWL charts.
  - Think, pair, share.
- Repeat, review, summarize.
- Build background knowledge if you find gaps in an ELL's knowledge.
- Use peer tutors. If possible, select a student who is a step above the ELL's proficiency level.
- Use graphic organizers, maps, charts, and timelines to help students make visual associations.

► **Provide collaborative opportunities to construct knowledge.** Use cooperative learning strategies to promote social and academic language development. ELLs have access to more comprehensible input when they negotiate meaning with a partner. Some cooperative learning activities that work well with ELLs are:

- jigsaw reading
- numbered heads together
- partners

—Contributed by  
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