

Can teacher inquiry be a piece of cake?

It appeared that my cake had some secret ingredients that I had not realized. Now I had to not only identify the ingredients for my cake but also locate where I could get them.

I did collaborate with the Kindergarten teachers, our school's Curriculum Resource Teacher, and our school's Assistant Principal. I read professional books in my own library and also my school building's library. I also researched on the internet. At times I could just make copies of what resources I had found for my students to use. I just had to teach them what to do and how to use them.

But most times, I would have to identify what needed to be done, and then create myself what was needed to complete that learning activity. Then I used the resources I had created to teach my students and they would use my sheets for independent practice to reinforce the skills I had taught. I began to feel like the Little Red Hen when she had to plant, care for, harvest, grind, mix, and bake the bread herself.

Throughout the next days, weeks, and months I worked hard at identifying my students needs. They worked hard and learned many new things. Students began to realize that they were not the only one in the class that did not know what was going on, but instead they, and everyone else, did know and could do what was asked of them. We tried reading some of the pre-emergent books. I felt they could read them, but they were not having success. So I began writing and one of my teacher's aid began illustrating some stories with simple sight words and word families. They began by memorizing the story and moved onto reading these little books. We read them forward. We read them backward.

They started working on spelling words centered on word families. Not only taking written spelling tests, but also passing those tests and mastering reading the words. Our spelling tests

were different that the average spelling test. Because my students had different needs they took a 3 part spelling test. First they took a regular written spelling test, completed independently. Then individually they took 2 more parts to the test. They spelled the word out loud and they also identified the sounds in the word. Sometimes you have to make your cake a little differently than everyone else does. But, you can still produce a wonderful cake.

Handwriting did improve, although not as much as I would have liked. Students had from the first of school been "writing"



stories. At first they did complain, "I can't write!" But as we read book after book, and looked at the stories that pictures told, they began to understand that they too could become a writer. They would draw pictures and then dictate to a grown up what their picture was about. After we began working on spelling words, some of my students began labeling their pictures. I knew they were ready to begin writing sentences on their own. But, I had reached a road block. Try as hard as I could, they would not move from labeling into writing sentences. After attending a reading conference, I came back to the classroom with an idea that I tried. And it worked!! We had an stuffed animal, a turtle named Theodore whom we called Teddy, that

came to visit our classroom. Although they knew he was a stuffed animal, they went into the world of imagination for me. I asked them to write in sentences for me, they would not do so. He asked them to write in sentences for him, they wrote in sentences!! They would write for Teddy, read to Teddy, do math for Teddy, do just about anything for him. And they did!

We celebrated little successes, which led to even bigger successes. Not one of my students were left behind. Each and every one of my students learned, gained self-confidence, and were eager for the next learning challenge. Along the way we did identify 3 students with specific learning needs. They were addressed and are advancing properly. About 6 of my students will be at the top of their first grade class the next school year. And the rest....they will be exactly where they need to be, average. This year has been a year of extremely hard work, but also one of extreme academic improvements, also one of success. But, one thing that happened is that each and every student came away from this school year knowing that they were someone important and they could do it!!

Had it not been for teacher inquiry I would not have been able to identify and meet my students' needs. It will definitely be something that I will use in the future, in fact, I can't see me teaching without it! The work that it requires is far outweighed by the benefits of using it.

Although this school year was not a piece of cake, in that it was a hard road of work with not knowing the direction I needed to go or the place I would end up at. But it did produce a prize winning cake that all of my students were able to partake in!

...and that student I was terrified of. He is one of them that I love the dearest. But that parent that I was terrified of..... well, I am glad that my legs are longer than hers!

Choosing a protocol:

Time for reflection and conversation

“I’ve wasted time, and time is life. Time is all there is.”

Gloria Steinem, Founder of Ms. Magazine

By Ann H. Nance

Ask teachers what they need most to improve instruction and the reply is time! Time is one resource schools never have enough of and one that is treasured. Teachers recognize the immense value of analyzing student work to drive instruction, challenge writers, and reform schools through best practice, but this requires time- time for contemplation, reflection, consideration, and conversation.

Protocols “promote among colleagues both exploration of important areas of teaching and learning as well as sustained collaborative inquiry into particular questions about teaching and learning,” (Allen and Blythe 2004). “The structure of protocols is intended to encourage conversations, normally carried out within 40 minutes to over an hour that are productive, inclusive, positive, and safe. They are designed to configure- not script- an experience through which individuals and the group as a whole can learn.”

Protocols discipline conversation, making wise use of our limited time, by providing procedures and guidelines. However few are aware of the great variety of protocols available. Mention the word protocol and many educators think of the “warm” and “cool” feedback of The Tuning Protocol. This protocol is great for revising assignments or focusing on specific issues to gain feedback.

Our Inquiry Group utilized this protocol in assessing the effectiveness of writing lessons and assignments at the end of the school year. Certainly this is important, but it is only one choice in a pool of protocols and purposes. In contrast, the Collaborative Assessment Conference focuses on careful examination of one piece of student work such as a single

writing. With this protocol, observers look for possibilities in the writing. This scrutiny guides “next steps” to encourage and challenge the writer. We found this protocol effective during development of writing throughout the school year.

My next goal as a teacher-learner is to explore the Hypothesis-Test Process which provides a look at a student you are worried about as a learner. This protocol pulls on observation and interpretations to identify patterns which lead to hypotheses to explore.

A sampling of other protocols to consider:

Consultancy- provides opportunity for educators to solve a problem or gain new ways of thinking about a dilemma.

Descriptive Review- provides examination grounded in description without judgment or evaluation.

Standards- allows educators to analyze student work in relation to learning goals and scoring rubrics.

Charrette- offers new perspectives on work or projects for improvement.

Virtual Slice- looks at a cross-section of student work to provide a picture of what students know.

To experience a “virtual protocol” visit <http://www.lasw.org/vp.html>. Using time wisely is essential in a teacher’s work life, and protocols maximize valuable yet limited time. Protocols may examine and evaluate. Others allow no evaluation. Some invite interpretation, speculation, or opportunity to hypothesize. Allen and Blythe (2004) suggest that you consider purpose, anatomy, spirit, and authority when choosing a protocol.

“Minute-ticks, hour-tocks don’t bother Father Time. Years don’t fret him either. ‘Mind days,’ he says, ‘and years follow.’”

George Ella Lyon, Father Time and the Day Boxes

Banned Books Week: a travesty to all word loving peoples

By Alex Hall

Though I think that having a week dedicated to banned books is, in and of itself, contradictory to everything I know as a teacher, an American, and a literature lover, it still fascinates me. The last week in September every year is dedicated to the books that have been deemed, by one organization or another, as dangerous and have been banned in a multitude of venues.

It sounds as if the American Library Association, the sponsoring group for this event, is celebrating the tradition of taking books away from readers without trusting the reader to make wise literary decisions; however, the ALA is only trying to bring attention to the epidemic habit of overbearing supervisors to determine to others what is acceptable. This succeeds in only promoting their personal moral agenda making us sacrifice a higher mental ratio than we are aware of.

As if banning books all over the country isn't quite enough, the ALA has put together a list of the most commonly banned books in the nation and ranked them in order. I am indeed angry enough that America has lost sense with itself to start keeping materials from spongy minds. However, if I /were/ a supporter of banning books, the order in which the books are listed would still befuddle me. As a literary mind, I am angered by the presence of The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, The Perks of Being a Wallflower, The Color Purple, and I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings in the top ten list of banned books of 2007. Barring that though, and strictly looking at the list logically, I would still be angered.

The number one challenged book in 2007 was And Tango Makes Three, a story about two male penguins caring for an egg? And the most challenged book of the last decade is Scary Stories by Alvin Schwartz while The Anarchist Cookbook, which teaches the reader how to construct weapons and incendiary devices is placing at a dismal 57? What makes a book more dangerous than the other?

What makes the people who and organizations that ban

these books so knowledgeable anyway? How can one value determination to stop free thought as a character trait? How can a person become so obstinate to think that their opinion matters more than others? They don't have to think of it as a major difference, either; the second someone begins to consider their thoughts and opinions more valuable than the next persons' is the moment that their lives are immediately suspect and they are off my sociological roll call.

The entire venue of literature is dedicated to being open minded and critical. But when /your/ criticisms effect /my/ options, you have infringed upon a precious right that I was born with as a member of the American community. You can criticize, loathe, and personally black-list any piece that you deem morally unacceptable; we are, after all, all human beings, born with the burden of judgment.

But who is anyone to deem what is acceptable to the status quo? Why do people feel the need to push their personal agenda? It is unacceptable to use "protection of the children" as an excuse; to truly protect someone, you should warn them of upcoming dangers and crises, not divert their attention from them so that they learn no decision making skills.

Also unacceptable is the use of the faith crutch. I am a Christian man, more comfortable in my faith than ever, and I doubt that I could ever force myself to use my faith as a way to convince others that what they are doing is sinful. Besides that, America is a secular nation; though some religions are more popular, no religion rules.

To think that one person's opinion and values are more important is a prejudiced and un-American trait. The ALA

makes the last week of September Banned Books Week as an ironic tribute to the stifling art of the overbearing man or woman. I believe it will take much more exposure to this "protective" and "Christian" habit to stop the epidemic; more work is necessary to thwart this disease, the disease of people thinking they can make decisions for the majority by simply being louder than the rest of us.

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How can we create proficient writers?

Teacher Preparedness is Essential; Administration Support is Critical

By Kristi Wiles

Writing is an important and highly stressed part of the Commonwealth of Kentucky's major form of academic assessment, the CATS (Commonwealth Accountability Testing System). The *Kentucky Writer's Handbook* outlines policies as dictated by the Kentucky Department of Education and states that writing must be done in all content areas. Many schools require that potential portfolio pieces be created in every class. Can this lead to writing proficiency? Does sheer exposure to writing make a student a proficient writer?

If you look on the Kentucky Department of Education's website and compare the CATS scores from school to school and from content area to content area you will notice a significant leap in scores in the areas of social studies, science, reading, and humanities, especially humanities. However, no great leaps, only baby steps, in the areas of writing and math. This article will focus primarily on the writing scores. These low scores are attributed, or perhaps I should say, "blamed," on the writing teachers. However, the writing teachers do not have as much control over their content as do the other teachers.

First, consider the high scores of the other content areas. The social studies content of the CATS test comes only from what is taught in social studies. Shocking, I know, but this is the actual case. Social studies departments and teachers design their curriculum maps based on core content standards created by the Kentucky Department of Education.

The social studies tests contain only core content from this sanctioned list. Therefore, everything on the social studies tests would have been taught to the class at some point on the curriculum calendar. The same goes for science and humanities, all of which shown large jumps in accountability scores.

Why is this not the case for writing portfolios and on-demand tests? First of all, writing portfolios are a collaborative effort among teachers from all contents including those content areas where writing is not stressed nor is the teaching of writing provided in that particular teachers training for that particular content. For example, mathematics teachers are asked to create at least one writing piece (potential portfolio piece) in their classes each year. Several schools assign one per semester. However, a math teacher can earn his/her bachelor's degree and teaching certification and only have been exposed to the two most basic English classes in college, usually WTG or ENG 101 and 102, neither of which provide any strategies for teaching or even learning the writing process. None of his/her classes will ever address the analytical scoring guide by which each and every portfolio piece will eventually be scored. Therefore, how can they be expected to guide a student through the writing process to reach the level of proficiency?

It is practically impossible. One solution to this problem could be for the state to incorporate writing core content standards into each core content class. For example, social studies content could include writing a poem on a historical event. Another example would be for humanities core content to include the writing of song lyrics. Yet another example would be for healthy lifestyle core content to include writing a persuasive piece on abstinence or abortion or an informational piece on birth control or STDs.

What can we do to solve this particular concern? Teachers are not properly prepared, and it's not by any negligence of their own.

Universities should begin to incorporate more writing into the content teacher's curriculum, not just a mention that it should be done, but a thorough investigation and experience of the writing process. Each teacher, upon college graduation, should have a proficient writing portfolio that will demonstrate that he/she is capable of writing and of teaching writing to the level of proficiency. Some simple solutions also lie in the hands of administration. For example, *intense* writing training would benefit many core content teachers. Many consultants from the state and district levels are available. Also, some consultation firms could be hired. Retired teachers could be brought in to mentor content teachers. By the beginning of the school year each content teacher should be able to demonstrate that he/she can write to the level of proficiency. Otherwise, how can he/she be expected to teach others to do so? We, as educators and administrators, need to steer clear of the old saying, "Those who can do. Those who can't teach." By demonstrating that educators can write proficiently, we are proving that "Those who can, teach."

Thirdly, many language arts teachers express the need to receive more high quality content pieces; however, high quality is not the only concern. Many content teachers do not turn in pieces at all, leaving the senior English teachers and their students to fend for themselves.

Administrators often fail to hold teachers accountable for not turning in pieces. The most successful schools' scores have administrators who create and enforce policies for turning in content writings.

In conclusion, in order for students to become proficient writers, all teachers must be able to teach writing proficiently, administrators must make certain that all teachers are prepared to teach writing to this level, and universities must also properly prepare teachers to teach writing. Teaching students to write proficiently is a collaborative effort among all teachers, but without administrative support, it is virtually impossible. Teacher preparedness is essential; however, administrative support is critical.