

Writing Across the Curriculum: Getting Started

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Alongside the implementation of the Learning to Learn curriculum reform, there have been quite a lot of changes and challenges in our society and around the world such as those in economic, scientific, technological and social developments. To prepare our students well for local and global changes taking place in various aspects of life, it is essential for Hong Kong schools to further take forward the Learning to Learn curriculum reform and to sustain and deepen the key emphases as we move onto a new phase of curriculum renewal and updating which is known as the Learning to Learn 2.0. Capitalizing on the positive experience gained, Learning to Learn 2.0 is a continual journey to work in a more focused manner in different learning skills and strategies, generic skills and values and attitudes. With the new senior secondary curriculum being introduced with TSA and Pre-S1 Assessments, schools territory-wide are adjusting their curriculums to meet the challenge of the assessments. The updated curriculum requires students to think and learn in a much deeper way, and one of the best ways to facilitate that deeper learning is to get students writing. Not just in English language classes, but all the time. Literacy and general knowledge of the world should go hand in hand along the curriculum development.

Why Writing Across the Curriculum?

Teachers play a critical role in supporting language development. Beyond teaching children to read and write in school, they need to help children learn and use aspects of language associated with the academic discourse of the various school subjects. They need to help them become more aware of how language functions in various modes of communication across the curriculum. They need to understand how language works well enough to select materials that will help expand their students' linguistic horizons and to plan instructional activities that give students opportunities to use the new forms and modes of expression to which they are being exposed. Teachers need to understand how to design the classroom language environment so as to optimize language and literacy learning and to avoid linguistic obstacles to content area learning.

Learning to write, and write well, is a crucial life skill. Not only does it help one succeed in school, it is vital to succeed in the 'real' world too. Writing has become essential in today's wired world. We communicate through the written word on a daily basis via email and text messages. When secondary and tertiary graduates enter the work force, they will be expected to know how to fire up their computers and write sensible email messages pretty much no matter which fields they choose for their careers.

In the area of English Language development, to respond to various contextual changes locally and globally, Reading Across the Curriculum (RaC) alongside with Writing Across the Curriculum (WaC) will be given stronger emphasis. Reading and writing regularly, in all subject areas including Language, Math, General Studies and now even Science is going to be crucial. Strengthening literary development through connecting students' learning experiences and incorporating new literacy practices to enable learners to process and create multimodal texts is important. Though a real and systematic implementation of RaC and WaC across all subjects in schools still takes some time to achieve, teachers can kick start this initiative through incorporating some classroom strategies which will further be explained below.

Getting started with Writing Across the Curriculum

Teachers from Farm Road Government Primary School (FRGPS) have identified effective strategies to promote writing; and explore techniques and materials to stimulate students' thinking on social, global and cultural issues over the years of collaboration with us. Students there have learned that becoming a competent writer involves knowing and understanding the forms, functions and features of writing. They have tried to facilitate literacy skills development and help students to establish meaningful links among local, global contexts and themselves; positive values and attitudes and world knowledge.

Here are three flavorful ways teachers have tried in spicing up their writing in the classroom:

1. **Expository Writing:** Have students write (e.g. a travel pamphlet) for some real world writing experience. This gives not only the students hands-on experience in the topic *Tourism*, but fulfills the assessment requirement that students produce

not only narrative writings, but longer, more topic-based writings too. In our sharing session more local and global topics such as *How to Deal with Stress in life*, *Helping the Poor* and *Natural Disasters* and their related framework, content, and specific classroom examples will be discussed. Implementation of different reading and writing strategies and the on-going reflection and evaluation during co-planning meetings will be shared with teacher audience. The writing packages developed with the schools were designed to enable a range of students with different abilities to benefit from social, cultural and global perspectives they would not be exposed to otherwise.

2. **Project-learning:** The updated curriculum guide requires all students to be able to collect and manage a vast amount of information brought about by information technology. Being able to research a topic in both English language and other disciplines like General Studies and write about it is deemed important. The goal is for all students to become **self-directed learners** who are capable of researching (and writing about!) a wide variety of subjects.
3. **Process Writing Approach:** What makes an effective piece of writing? Good writers plan and revise, rearrange and revise text, re-read and produce multiple drafts before they produce their finished piece. This is what a process writing approach is about. In Hong Kong, the syllabus is tight and not much space is left for process writing. How can teachers in FRGPS still find space to do this?

The Indispensable Writing Elements

For deeper learning, some support for writing is indispensable. For instance, **writing rubrics** help to make expectations and grading procedures clear, and provide a formative assessment to guide and improve instructions. And here having **a uniform and higher expectation of students** is crucial to success. If just one class does this in school, the change would not have happened.

Improving something as complex and culturally embedded as teaching requires the efforts of all players ... But teachers must be the primary driving force behind change. They are best positioned to understand the problems that students face and to generate possible solutions.

Stigler & Hiebert (2009, p.121)

Good examples of school rubrics were shared with the English Panel along the way. As

teachers worked with their students to implement the writing process, they began to master writing and felt more confident. Peer reviewing and editing, with clear guidelines for students to give feedback on each other's work, motivated and allowed students to discuss their writing with their peers, and made the work load a little lighter for teachers. Because of teachers' encouragement, students made thoughtful changes to their writing content. They were not afraid to write.

In order to enhance the transition from upper primary to junior secondary in reading and writing lessons, which is a common concern, **non-fictional materials** such as documentaries and news /magazine articles which can raise their awareness of different perspectives of looking into a problem or an issue have been used in KS2 for reading input. It is necessary for primary students nowadays to read adequately a wide range of informational texts on global issues and themes in order for them to write. From there, a wide range of vocabulary and language features such as similes, metaphors, phrases to express feelings etc. could be learnt to facilitate reading and writing.

This **consistent approach to the writing process** and **explicit instruction on the writing process** by the teachers helped students consolidate their knowledge learned for producing a good piece of writing. The process from generating ideas, developing and organizing ideas to revising and editing to publishing has helped teachers move away from the practice of teaching vocabulary and grammar items only in that particular unit of the textbook. They were more aware of drawing on both students' previously and currently learned new language so that students could apply these in a more integrated manner in each writing task.

Impact on learning

Most students showed noticeable improvement in writing. Students' writing pieces were lengthier when we compared those in the past. They showed maturity and understanding in the use of these writing techniques. As reported by teachers this year, there was a rise in the number of high-achievers in writing. While some students gravitated towards writing independently, many needed more practice with essential writing lessons. If a teacher has struggling students, he or she will need to go back and do more shared and guided writing, as well as spend some time simply conferencing with them to open up their minds.

In this sharing session, teachers from Farm Road Government Primary School will help teacher participants to gain an understanding of how students develop their writing skills. Writing Across the Curriculum is a wonderful way to get students

writing and learning in bigger, better, deeper ways. Is your school working on writing across the curriculum?

A number of other school cases of how teachers attempt to improve students' writing will also be shared with teacher participants. Teachers' efforts and dedication are definitely crucial factors for success as they need to spend considerable time in scaffolding and giving constructive feedback to students. It is hoped that through the sharing, teacher participants could equip themselves with some strategies and adapt them to meet the learning needs of their students.

References:

1. Fillmore, L. W., & Snow, C. (2000). *What teachers need to know about language*. Centre for Applied Linguistics. Washington D.C.
2. Stigler, J. W., & Hiebert, J. (2009). *The teaching gap: Best ideas from the world's teachers for improving education in the classroom*. New York: Free Press.