

Infusing Self-directed Mindset and Skillset into Traditional Writing Contexts

Ms FUNG Ho-kwan, Jeanda (School-based Curriculum Development (Primary) Section, EDB)

Ms Gloria WONG, Ms Omelia CHOI, Ms Estelle CHAN , Ms Joey WONG (Pun U Association Wah Yan Primary School)

Learning is most effective when students play an active role in the learning process and when they take charge of their own learning. The promotion of learner autonomy and independence should start at an early age. While self-directed learning is regarded as an integral part of students' ultimate achievements, more effort should go into demonstrating how to monitor the learning process and providing opportunities for students to develop metacognitive strategies.

(English Language Education Key Learning Area Curriculum Guide (Primary 1-Secondary 6), Curriculum Development Council, 2017, p.33)

Background

The new update of the curriculum guide maps out the direction for the ongoing renewal of the English Language Education Curriculum i.e. to sustain, deepen and focus on what have been established in the past and has reiterated the importance of *learners' independent learning*. To enable students to become motivated and independent language learners, teachers *should infuse various degree of self-directed learning mindset as well as skillset into their learning*. This mode of learning has the benefit of helping students develop the essential skills, strategies and attitudes for lifelong learning. To facilitate self-directed language learning in the area of English Language subject, teachers of **Pun U Association Wan Yan** have created opportunities for **students to make choices or decisions in their learning by providing a wide range**

of learning materials and activities (e.g. drama, debates, projects) to help them explore their interests. They help students **set realistic learning goals and enable them to monitor, review and assess their own performance by building self and peer assessment into their learning activities** (e.g. evaluation checklists, success criteria). They **help students improve their work through providing constructive feedback**. All these have helped nurture students to become independent learners.

Infusing self-directed mindsets and skillsets into the writing curriculum

Having the right attitudes is essential to continuing success in nurturing self-directedness or independence in students. Some important attributes *are responsibility, confidence, curiosity, drive, optimism, courage and determination, according to Maurice Gibbons (2016)*, who is a specialist in the creation of innovative approaches to self-directed learning instruction. The programs he has designed emphasize self-direction, challenge and excellence and most importantly, how to motivate students to act. Motivation is both a unique and critical issue in teaching students to be self-directed. It is unique in that the teacher must motivate them to take on the task of managing their own activities, and must then teach them to motivate themselves to be owners of their continuous self-directed learning.

He laid down some useful principles for schools to pursue self-directed learning. In self-directed learning, students are the only one responsible for what they do and how it works out. The key here is to take 100% responsibility for themselves. It also takes courage to set an ambitious goal, and even more courage to pursue it. When we do take action and meet problems, only the courageous begin and only the persistent work

through to completion. Such characteristics as courage and determination are traits teachers need to develop in students in order for them to be independent learners. By conducting self-directed activities that require those traits we also develop them.

The focus of this sharing session is writing. Mastering the conventions of writing and nurturing students to be independent writers would require these character traits as well as reflection and action, both knowledge and practice. Sparking students to think about their own writing would seem to be very difficult at first and it did actually. During the course of writing development, teachers helped strengthen students' independent learning through *taking on the role of facilitators, guides, models who observe, listen and question, support and encourage, learn from and with the students*. For instance, students discussed and drafted questions for the pictures in a crime picture story writing. Peer feedback or critique on each other's writing necessitated students' communication on the strengths and weaknesses of their writing and helped themselves improve. There were many other moments where we could see students taking up responsibility to learn. For instance, students' telling of their own personal experience being a 'detective' at home or in school and how they solved the problem at the end. In the writing lessons, they thought, discussed and drafted questions for the pictures under the topic 'Crime'. They did peer feedback and critique on writing in groups or in pairs. They talked to each other specifically about their writing strengths and weaknesses for further improvement. Students felt motivated and found ownership and meaning in their learning. Teachers indeed treasure the independent moments of students' learning.

Having said that, however, having self-directed learning mindsets in the lessons does not mean that teachers do not give any inputs for students. During our collaboration, the linkage between reading and writing was carefully thought through. The writing course was designed to enable students to benefit from a wide range of social, cultural

and global perspectives. It was characterised by strong input on a clear reading and writing framework with reference from the 6+1 Traits Writing Model (Bellamy, 2005). Vocabulary, carefully selected, and structured language patterns, substantial reading materials and graphic organizers were chosen for different types of writing to enrich students' ideas. This is important for developing writing techniques after reading and is applicable to all levels. The aim to infuse these skillsets for independent writing has led the team to co-develop many reading and writing tasks over these two years. Students' writing was analyzed throughout the school year. Teachers observed that **students were more reflective and responsible in their writing and could apply the skills they learned in different writing tasks**. It was also highlighted that while writing is often seen as a quiet, individualised activity that shuns excessive talk, the boys in this classroom transcended the process to a more active one. They have been developing a very positive attitude towards writing and most students have great improvement in length as well as quality of writing.

The writing process

In the writing lessons, students were guided through the process of drafting, revising and editing and sharing their ideas and feelings on the topics. As National Writing Project and Nagin (2006) defined that an effective writing assignment should engage students in a series of cognitive processes such as reflection, analysis and synthesis so that students are able to transform the reading material in order to complete the writing assignments. The lessons encouraged reflection, analysis and synthesis of what they had learned from the reading elements in the packages. Students worked in groups to prepare the draft. Intensive discussions were involved. They allowed students to share more ideas together. The changing practice of writing was supported by teachers. They

agreed that the carefully planned procedures including providing substantial input, the step by step writing procedures and feedback at the mind-mapping and drafting stages were helpful and useful. In fact, teachers spent more lesson time on teaching writing during class time but they thought it was a worthwhile experience. Most students made good progress in terms of ideas and content, organization, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions and even voice. Teachers even brought these ideas to other levels.

The English Panel's work

The supporter also observed that the English Panel chairpersons actively engaged in professional development through reflecting on their daily practices, discussing issues, sharing knowledge and experience with fellow teachers. The school principal has given teachers ample opportunity to attend courses, seminars and conferences regularly organized by various education institutes including the Education Bureau. Teachers are kept abreast of the direction of the English Language development. The English Panel also helped parents understand their children's performance in both formative and summative assessments by organizing mid-term and end of term parents' meetings. Parents were informed of the strengths and weaknesses of their children in a specific area based on the assignments in the English Language.

In this sharing session, teachers from Pun U Association Wan Yan Primary School will help teacher participants to gain an understanding of how students develop their writing skills, identify effective strategies to promote independent writing and explore techniques and materials to promote self-directed learning in English Language

learning. 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 in this attempt as they need to spend considerable time in 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. Bellamy, P. C. (Ed.). (2005). *Seeing with new eyes: A guidebook on teaching and assessing beginning writers using the six-trait writing model* (6th ed). Portland, OR: Northwest Regional educational Laboratory.
2. Curriculum Development Council. (2017). *English Language Education KLA: English Language Curriculum Guide (P1 – P6)*. Hong Kong: Government Logistics Department.
3. Gibbons, M. (2016). *Self-directed Learning*. Retrieved from <http://selfdirectedlearning.com/index.php/teaching-dsl>
4. National Writing Project, & Nagin, C. (2006). *Because writing matters: improving student writing in our schools*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.