Teaching Writing to Adolescents

by Dr. Michael W. Smith

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have to be regarded as good news for teachers who care about writing. The CCSS emphasize writing clear and convincing arguments drawing on multiple sources, informational papers that do meaningful work, and compelling narratives that foster an understanding of oneself and/or others (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). This is a far cry from the "formulaic writing and… thinking" that, according to Hillocks (2002, p. 200), is rewarded by so many current standards and standards-based assessments. But, as I've argued elsewhere (Fredricksen, Wilhelm, & Smith, 2012; Smith, Wilhelm, & Fredricksen, 2012; Wilhelm, Smith, & Fredricksen, 2012), with this good news comes a challenge: Traditional approaches to teaching writing aren't enough to meet these new standards.

Langer's (2001) study of schools that beat the odds, that is, schools whose students did better on high-stakes assessments than demographically comparable schools, provided far more compelling instruction than what is traditional. She puts it this way:

> In the most successful schools, there was always a belief in students' abilities to be able and enthusiastic learners; they believed all students can learn and that they, as teachers, could make a difference. They therefore took on the hard job of providing rich and challenging instructional contexts in which important discussions about English, language, literature, and writing in all its forms could take place, while using both the direct instruction and contextualized experiences their students needed for skills and knowledge development. Weaving a web of integrated and interconnected experiences, they ensured that their students would develop the pervasive as well as internalized learning of knowledge, skills, and strategies to use on their own as more mature and more highly literate individuals at school, as well as at home and in their future work. (p. 876)

Langer's analysis suggests two major dimensions of the teaching done in the successful schools: They created integrated and motivating contexts and they provided powerful instruction. Let's take each of these in turn.

> *"Traditional approaches to teaching writing aren't enough to meet these new standards."*

Provide Integrated and Motivating Contexts

All of the writing we ask students to do in **Hampton-Brown Edge** is embedded in units built around authentic Essential Questions that matter in the here and now. When Jeff Wilhelm and I did our study of the literate lives of boys both in and out of school (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; 2006) one of our participants said something in an interview that haunts us to this day:

> English is about NOTHING! It doesn't help you DO anything. English is about reading poems and telling about rhythm. It's about commas and crap like that for God's sake. What does that have to DO with DOING anything? It's about NOTHING!

His contention was echoed in one way or another by many of the other boys. Little wonder that so many of them rejected the reading and writing they were given to do in school.

But they didn't reject reading and writing outside school. Every one of the young men in our study had an active literate life. One of the foundational principles of **Edge** is that we wanted the series to make it clear that English is about something important. That's why we built our units around Essential Questions, the deep and abiding questions we all face as we think about our lives.

Here's another haunting response from one of our young men: "I can't stand writing if I've been put on a line and if I walk outside of it something happens. I like to be able to just kind of go off in my own little rampage of self-expression." The writing projects and shorter writing activities we ask students to do don't ask kids to walk a line. Instead each unit casts students in the role of authors who have a contribution to make to the ongoing classroom conversation about those deep and abiding questions. In short, our units provide the "rich and challenging" writing contexts that Langer calls for.

But the **Edge** unit structure does more than that. Because our units are integrated, they engage students in an extended consideration of the Essential Questions by bringing a variety of different kinds of texts into meaningful conversation. This structure facilitates writing to sources. The extended consideration alone helps students to

develop the topic knowledge they need to write. The other payoff for our unit structure is that it allows students to draw on multiple sources in their own writing, something that assessments from both the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortia (SBAC) call for. PARCC, for example, requires "writing to sources rather than writing to decontextualized expository prompts" (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers) and encourages the comparison and synthesis of ideas across a range of informational sources. So does *Edge*. Frequent shorter and longer writing activities build writing fluency in authentic and meaningful contexts.

Writing

Write About Literature

Opinion Statement The selections present different views of how a bully reacts when confronted. Which narrative do you think is more realistic? Why? Use examples from both texts to write a paragraph stating your opinion.

Writing activities require synthesis of ideas across a range of texts.

Provide Powerful Instruction

In *Edge*, we ask students to do compelling writing. But we do far more than that. We teach them how to do that writing. And through the course of our books we provide lots and lots of opportunities for students to practice what we've taught them as they write in response to reading, write to learn, and write to sources. In each unit we help students analyze a model of the target text. Then we help them learn how to successfully write their own text. The CCSS emphasize the importance of evidence, so for each of our major texts we ask students to return to the text to reread and then write. And remember, because that writing is about an authentic question, students have to select the best possible evidence. The classroom conversations that follow their writing provide clear and immediate feedback on the quality of their work. But that's not all. We provide planning heuristics to help them develop and organize their writing. We provide sentence frames to help them develop the syntactic skills they need. We also engage them in assessing and revising their own work and provide supports for their collaboration with other student writers.

In addition, because we engage them in writing that matters, we create a context in which they will be motivated to learn the grammar and usage conventions they need. Study after study after study has clearly established that teaching grammar and usage through skill and drill approaches that are isolated from students' writing is ineffective (cf. Hillocks, 1986, Hillocks & Smith, 2003; Smith, Cheville, &

Hillocks, 2005; Smith & Wilhelm, 2007). Such isolated grammatical instruction not only doesn't help students, it actually hurts them. It takes instructional time away from more effective instructional approaches and it sours their attitude toward their English classes.

Edge embeds instruction in correctness into the work that students are doing on their own writing. Each writing project has several focal correctness areas. For example, the instruction on autobiographical narratives includes instruction on capitalization, punctuating quotations, homonym confusion, and sentence completion. Students are given instruction and practice and then provided an immediate opportunity to apply what they learned to their own writing.

Think about the students for whom this series is intended. Many of them will be plagued by a wide variety of correctness problems. And these problems will have persisted despite the fact that those students have been in school for years. A scattershot approach that tries to focus on every error in every paper is sure to be frustrating both to teachers and to students. It won't improve writing, but, as research on writing apprehension (cf. Hillocks, 1986) suggests, it might shut students' writing down. Marrying meaning with mechanics is sure to be more effective.

In short, the *Edge* series provides instruction that will help students become more competent and compelling writers, abilities that are crucially important both in and out of school.

Instruction to improve writing accuracy is integrated into writing projects.