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Writing Programme in a Scottish Secondary School

Introduction

This article is an attempt to showcase the good practice in the English Department, and more recently the entire school, namely Auchinleck Academy in East Ayrshire. It provides one possible way of assisting secondary school departments to adopt the philosophy of “Curriculum for Excellence”. The paper delineates how teachers of various subjects can underpin their curricula with good pedagogy whilst providing interdisciplinary links and transferable learning for pupils.

The school’s senior management team developed school policy in order to extend the good practice in the English Department across the whole school; steps that were taken, in part, as a response to pupils’ poor results in Writing in National Assessments. It was thought that a concerted approach to this area of concern was required from staff throughout the school. There was also a desire to create a more consistent experience of learning for pupils whilst extending existing sound practice. This approach involved all subject staff in taking a fundamental responsibility for pupil progress in writing. In a school population in which deprivation was substantial, it was also important

to address issues of pupils' low-esteem and motivation, part of which included incorporating opportunities for more autonomous learning. This article may offer approaches and strategies worth consideration by other departments and schools aiming to improve pupils' attainment in writing, or alternatively those wishing to take their first steps towards creating cross-curricular links in the spirit of "Curriculum for Excellence".

Background

The origins of the project were to be found in the English Department, which had been developing good practice in learning and teaching over a number of years and in pupils' writing in particular. This had resulted in a substantial improvement in pupils' writing attainment in National Assessments. Some of the methods used were taken from the North Lanarkshire Writing Pack and adapted radically to suit the needs of the pupils in the catchment area. In more recent years, the senior management team introduced a Literacy Across the Curriculum policy based on the school's existing good practice and the HMI(e) document "Improving Writing", which states that writing requires pupils to "think in ways which are crucial for their general development as learners" and "is therefore an important means of learning in aspects of the curriculum beyond English language". A substantial amount of discussion and consultation occurred initially and a large, whole-school committee was

formed. Teachers' views and needs were carefully considered for the implementation of this Auchinleck Academy initiative.

Literacy Across the Curriculum and other such initiatives are far from being new. Indeed, "Language Across the Curriculum" (Marland and Barnes 1977) was making its way through schools in the late 1970s and early 1980s; similar good practice has been revisited in the literature and, indeed, in the classroom at various times in recent decades, each time becoming an educational priority.

The Head Teacher and Senior Management Team led the initiative, giving it a high profile by raising it for discussion regularly at Curriculum Management Meetings, Head of Department Review Meetings and Subject/faculty Departmental Meetings. Gradual implementation of the policy was overseen on a whole school basis and normal monitoring procedures were put into place. Inevitably, continued refinement and development of the policy took place as necessary in the light of developments. In time the initiative became an integral part of the school's Improvement Plan and also an important feature of Departmental and Personal Development Plans.

Such is the commitment to the project's success that Continuing Professional Development opportunities are provided each year for any new staff in order

to ensure that everyone involved is fully engaged in the programme. New teachers are encouraged to attend a Literacy Workshop in which they are introduced to the Policy and are informed of its history. Responsibilities of teachers, parents and pupils are highlighted and the writing process is explained. Teachers are guided through a typical writing lesson from the perspective of their own subject, including detailed descriptions of each step in the writing process. Staff are then encouraged to discuss the place of writing in their subject; they look at examples of pupils' writing and at "scaffolding" (Pinnell, Gay Su and Scharer, Patricia L. 2003) or aids which can be used to support pupils during writing tasks.

The attempt to create continuity between the primary and secondary sectors in order to enhance learning is another phenomenon not unknown to education. However, it is relatively uncommon to find a member of staff who has been appointed with that specific remit. As a result of the then Scottish Executive's FLaT (Future of Learning and Teaching) Project this was a post that was created as part of the school's Project. Close links have been forged with associated primaries and shared good practice has evolved across the sectors. The post is that of Principal Teacher of Literacy and the remit was to support departments in implementing policy and thereafter act as a conduit for the sharing and development of good practice.

Pupils are encouraged to develop increasing autonomy in terms of their own progress in writing skills. This resonates with the work Black and Wiliam (1998) who promoted the notion of “devolving power to the learners” and who claim that without this, interactive formative assessment is not possible. Additionally, parents are asked to encourage and support their children in using the range of strategies they have learned to improve their writing skills. Writing Workshops for the parents of S1/2 pupils were organised and proved very successful. Parents were informed of the school’s policy and teachers from three different subject areas gave presentations about how they approach writing lessons. The presentations were effective in illustrating to parents how all teachers, despite obvious curriculum differences, teach planning and writing in the same way, thereby assisting pupils with transferring their writing skills across contexts. Parents were also encouraged to assist their children, using these strategies, with any writing tasks undertaken at home.

Lesson Programmes

One of the first stages of the project entailed department staff creating lesson programmes that ensured that writing was given a sufficient time allocation in the curriculum plan. Thereafter, units of work were produced in which the various types of writing featured. Writing frames (Wyse, Dominic and Jones

P136) and other appropriate scaffolding were incorporated at appropriate points. The teachers are aware of the limited effectiveness of these methods, however, and wean pupils off them when they seem ready to work more independently.

School wide, teachers are all considered to be teachers of writing and are expected to embed in their courses writing tasks of relevance to their subject and which help pupils to develop their skills and clarify their thinking. This is clearly in line with the philosophy of “Curriculum for Excellence” in which Literacy and Numeracy are seen as the responsibility of all teachers.

Additionally, subject teachers are expected to have high expectations of pupils’ writing, since this aspect of the self-fulfilling prophecy will promote learning and raise attainment across the curriculum.

Other aims of the project were to assist pupils to cope with the considerable cognitive demands of their various school subjects: to develop vocabulary, expression and organisational skills, to help them sustain and marshal their thoughts and to enable them to reflect, revise and evaluate their speech and writing and that of others. Clearly, there are several interdisciplinary skills here.

It has also become the duty of class teachers to ensure that pupils are familiar with all the procedures for developing writing skills and they are afforded

plenty of opportunities to practise these in the structured programmes. These programmes have been thoughtfully developed and include a variety of strategies such as discussion, planning, modelling, writing frames, word banks etc. A common correction code was introduced throughout the school and this aimed to provide consistency in teachers' formative assessment of writing. Simultaneously, teachers worked on assisting pupils to achieve the Core Targets (based on the 5-14 National Guidelines) of which more will be said later. Likewise, all teachers are expected to encourage S1/2 pupils to use their Spelling Dictionaries on an ongoing basis to promote accurate spelling.

The Process

The writing process in many English departments, and in this case throughout the school, comprises the following stages: stimulus, planning, writing, self and peer assessment, redrafting and finally ensuring technical accuracy and good presentation, with opportunities for pair, group or whole class discussion throughout. The above process of writing is backed by research in the field that outlines the various stages necessary to prepare pupils for writing. It varies slightly from the genre approach, perhaps even more popular, in which the stimulus stage specifically explores a genre exemplar and affords pupils the opportunity to deconstruct it, with a view to writing their own text in that

genre. (Cope, B. and Kalantzis, M. 1993) The benefits of self and peer assessment are also well documented. Indeed, Sadler (1989) claims that self and peer assessment are “essential to learning” and the work of White and Frederikson (1998) and Black and Wiliam (1998) substantiate that claim.

The task requirements such as the success criteria, the title, purpose and audience are all made clear to pupils. Sharing success criteria has become a central aspect of good practice, partly following the successful research of Sadler (1989) and, more recently, Black and Wiliam (1998). Sadler, in fact, refers to what he terms “guild knowledge” as a description of the vision the teacher attempts to share with the learners. It has been found that sharing a vision with pupils of what a successful piece of work is like, better enables learners to approach the goal more accurately. When teachers are able to communicate this concept knowledge, it not only assists learners with the concepts themselves but it also enhances the learners’ own metacognitive awareness. This, in turn, assists learners’ motivation since they are so much more involved in the learning process, their self-evaluation skills are developed and they are, therefore, more able to close the gap between what they know (or can do) and what they wish to know (or do). Additionally, teachers need to be constantly seeking opportunities to *teach* their learners in more precise and personalised ways. The more accurately they gauge their learners’ understanding and abilities, the more they are able to assist them to

the next steps in their progress. This means a more focused approach to formatively assessing pupils in the various phases of the lesson and devising appropriate strategies for individual learners. As Wiliam (2002) states, teaching is like a “constant regulation of learning”.

The stimulus may also include exemplars of effective writing, the teacher’s own modelling of the skills involved and the use of word walls or word banks. Staff saw the benefit of helping pupils to understand the key elements in the process and see the writing task as presenting a series of problems to solve. For example, one such problem may be “What do I have to do to achieve this purpose and make sure the reader understands and stays interested?”

Planning was seen as an area of particular importance since the “Improving Writing” (1999) report recognised that a common development need in writing was a lack of substance and limited development of ideas and it is through supported planning that pupils can make the most progress. Effective teachers assist pupils at this stage by employing strategies for eliciting ideas about content and style. These could include brainstorming, mind mapping, spider diagrams, listing or whatever suits the individual pupil. Thoughtful questioning by the teacher is crucial for some pupils in order for progress in

learning to occur. Writing frames have proved helpful for teachers of all subjects assisting less confident or less able pupils to structure their ideas. The ultimate aim in teaching planning, however, is to enable pupils to become independent planners who confidently use their preferred planning method to suit their learning style.

Classroom Climate

The importance of a climate of mutual respect and trust is well documented. Black and Wiliam (1998) re-asserted this belief in their argument that learning should depend not on the right answer but on the teacher sensitively working with the response given and assisting learners to take their learning forward. Pupils need to know that they will not be ridiculed for their “wrong” answer and that indeed they are valued as people. This classroom climate is one in which thinking in order to learn is encouraged and in which thinking skills and problem solving tasks are more common. John Gardner (2006) suggests that teachers develop more collaborative approaches to learning with more focus on analysis and discussion. This appears to encapsulate, to some degree, the philosophy of the teachers at Auchinleck Academy in the Literacy Across the Curriculum Programme. Teachers see themselves as learners, too, sometimes learning life experiences from pupils whilst enabling their learners to adopt a range of writing and other skills.

Core Targets

As a response to the need to address the shortfall in National Assessment attainment in writing, a particular focus was placed upon the main attainment targets in writing from the 5-14 National Guidelines. These were rewritten in “pupil-friendly” language and issued to each pupil. Copies were also posted on classroom walls throughout the school. These are discussed and clarified with pupils who become familiar with them over a relatively brief period of time. These became the main course targets that all pupils work towards as part of their progression. With the “Assessment is for Learning” Programme teachers had become aware of how important it is to share the success criteria with learners and devised the pupil friendly version so that this can work effectively.

Targets

The above Core Targets are broken down further for individual lessons and tasks. Pupils are informed of these learning objectives by means of a flip-chart, which remains in view throughout the lesson. The message is often reinforced by the character of WALT, standing for “we are learning to...” since this is possibly more memorable for learners and appeals especially to the younger pupils. This is substantiated by the work of Sadler (1989), who asserts that the way in which the learning objectives are expressed is

extremely important if pupils are to understand fully what they are expected to learn. More pupils achieve the learning objectives more successfully when they are expressed in concrete terms and this method of displaying them with a cartoon figure named with the acronym is certainly that. The other similar strategy is the use of WILF, an acronym for “what I’m looking for...” to convey the teacher’s expectations or success criteria of any task undertaken. (Mary James P135-136)

A sub-division of Lesson Targets is the setting of individual targets by the pupils themselves. This is not quite so common a phenomenon in secondary schools to date but one that is likely to gain ground as formative assessment strategies develop with the implementation of “Curriculum for Excellence”. This gives pupils autonomy with regard to their own learning, enhances motivation and produces an increased focus on their areas of need. As Schunk (1996) points out, learning is far more effective when pupils take more responsibility for the management of their own learning, including setting and working towards their targets. This approach has the added benefit of helping to promote sustainable learning skills, a much more efficacious one than where the teacher is the driver of all pupils’ learning. Without doubt, learners are more effective when not only is comprehension improved, but they are also helped to become more aware of their metacognition. This also

resonates with the work of Pollard et al (2000) who advocate that teachers need to teach pupils that tasks are about learning and not about performance or assessment.

Writing Books

Pupils are all issued with A4 sized jotters and they are taught to plan their writing on the left page and write the extended piece on the right hand page. Either the teacher or, in some cases, the pupil highlights the words and phrases that demonstrate achievement of the targets in their own work. This requirement ensures that pupils are actively involved in self-evaluating their work, aiming for the criteria and celebrating their own successes. It clearly involves a certain amount of metacognition, in addition to comprehension and use of the language of metacognition. This is a crucial way of working if learners are to be strategic about their progress according to Deakin Crick et al. (2002).

Writing Tasks

Smaller tasks undertaken by pupils are designed to build up gradually to a full-length piece. Tasks on character, setting, and atmosphere are taught separately so that pupils develop an understanding of the skills involved in

each aspect of writing. Pupils are awarded gold or silver stars for the best examples and are encouraged to prepare a copy for the “Writing Wall” in the corridor. This arrangement provides a wider audience for pupils’ work; it cultivates a sense of celebration and helps to create incentive in their peers.

During the preparatory stages, discussion, group work and paired activities are useful and effective strategies but the actual writing of extended pieces needs to be considered an individual activity with an atmosphere of purposeful concentration in the class. The teacher’s main role, at this stage, is to observe, monitor and support. Prior to engagement, pupils are reminded of the core targets and these are usually visible during the lesson.

“Placemats”

An innovative idea adopted by the English Department is this one in which pupils are each given a large laminated card that sits on their desks and acts as an aide memoir to pupils about their targets. Targets can be ticked or scored off as they are overtaken by pupils and can later be wiped clean for reuse. The placemats are clear visual reminders of what pupils are aiming for in any piece of work and again, engage pupils in taking an active role in their own development.

Conferencing

“Conferencing” is recognised by H.M.I(e) as the most effective strategy for evaluation to ensure development in writing. The pupil is expected to discuss the ideas, notes, drafts or plans with the teacher and/or other pupils, whose views are sought about the extent of their success in meeting the targets. This “filter” approach not only provides the pupils with helpful support but also creates a more positive experience. Pupils are also benefiting from a development of interpersonal skills, refining and expanding, decision-making and problem solving. This practice not only helps to build pupils’ self-esteem, crucial in successful writing, but also more obviously provides peer-support often triggering new ideas or developing ideas further. The standard of writing is often improved through the help of a “critical friend” in conference who regularly has more influence than the teacher through critical comment. These processes encourage pupils to focus more intently on the success criteria in order to assess themselves or their peers accurately, thereby improving the writing even further.

Following on from this is the process of editing and redrafting of sections or, indeed, the entire text. It is essential that for effective improvements to the writing, teachers make pupils aware of the need to redraft actively and see it as a means to improvement rather than merely a means of providing attractive presentation. Redrafting is not always possible or appropriate but it

is clearly a useful tool in improving writing, if done in this way.

Another important aspect of conferencing is proof-reading; the checking for technical accuracy such as in spelling, punctuation and capitalisation. Again the importance of the HMI(e) report was highlighted as teachers were encouraged to expect high standards in this aspect of writing. This expectation could take the form of oral feedback, while the pupils were writing, or written in response to a draft. It is possibly the case that most teachers value the content or ideas of a piece of writing above the technical accuracy but the basic skills are also important in raising pupils' attainment.

Feedback

All teachers are issued with guidelines for issuing feedback in which they are reminded about the desirability of pupils taking responsibility for self-assessment by checking their own work. Teachers are also reminded of the efficacy of commenting positively at every opportunity. Pupils are directed to find and correct their own errors through use of the Correction Code. This is done by teachers putting symbols, to which pupils should react, in the margins. Additionally, teachers are urged to mark selectively rather than mark every error. They need to be selective and help pupils to focus on one or two development needs at a time since this is most effective. Another benefit of

this approach is that it reduces the amount of time necessary for feedback. Class time is allocated to acting upon the feedback given as this is more likely to take place than if it was left to pupils to do in their own time. The last step is that teachers encourage pupils to enter words in their personal Spelling Dictionaries and learn the spellings. Pupils' progress can be enhanced if they are assisted to be more proactive in monitoring their work and initiating their own progress. Learners can be asked to review their own work of a similar type prior to engaging in a new task. In this way they are encouraged to develop their self-assessment strategies. It is well documented that the feedback pupils obtain from engaging with their work in this way is significant in terms of their belief in being able to learn. In Auchinleck, pupils using the Writing Books are engaging in this way as they can easily follow their progress from one type of writing to another. This provides continuity in learning while also enhancing self-esteem, a central issue in learning. Methods such as these are also more likely to assist pupils to transfer their generic learning to other situations and types of learning. This is, therefore, a more productive and sustainable type of learning that produces life skills, and lessons that incorporate such learning are clearly more beneficial.

Recording

To ensure that pupil progress is monitored effectively, profiles noting pupils'

strengths and development needs for each completed piece of work are updated on a regular basis. Pupils are permitted access to these so that they are fully aware of their own progress, and it helps to convey the idea of pupil ownership of their learning. This process is not dissimilar to the work of Black et al (2002) in which pupils are encouraged to keep records of how they have addressed their needs.

Display and Celebration

As previously mentioned, a Writing Wall was established in the English corridor for displaying examples of pupils' best work. Similarly, there is a writing wall in a more central part of the school, which is for celebrating pupils' achievement in writing from "Subject of the Month", with subjects each having a turn of using the wall in this way. By this means pupils' achievements are celebrated and the work can be read and discussed informally by peers. This multi-subject wall is a simple yet effective way of maintaining impetus in the project and in helping both pupils and teachers to sustain focus on writing. It also sends out the clear message that writing is important in all areas of learning.

To create and maintain a positive ethos of achievement, pupils' successes are publicised by means of the school newsletter and the website. Pupils are also

awarded certificates at school assemblies for outstanding pieces of writing or are nominated as “Star Writers” meaning that their work is displayed on the Writing Wall for a particular reason. In this way they experience their efforts being valued, not only by their class teacher or by a particular department, but also by the whole school and beyond. This is clearly a demonstration of what pupils have learned and pieces of writing so displayed and celebrated have undoubtedly met the learning objectives. It is, therefore, a more public and more high profile means of providing opportunities for learners to “show what they know”.

Finally, “Literacy Across the Curriculum” bulletins are produced each month and there is a particular notice board in the staff room for displaying information to update staff on the project.

Quality Assurance

It was agreed that it was the responsibility of the Senior Management Team to ensure that Writing Across the Curriculum was incorporated into the School Improvement Plan and into Department Improvement Plans. Senior staff also monitor the learning and teaching by visiting classes to observe the various strategies and monitor standards with regard to “Word Walls” and the “Core Targets”.

Evaluation

Review meetings have been set up in order to monitor progress across the school while department meetings regularly reflect upon the department's progress. Principal Teachers' duties include ensuring that all teachers follow agreed procedures by means of sampling pupils' work and observing learning and teaching. Individual members of staff are supported in their development of their own effective teaching strategies, share these with colleagues and adapt courses and methods as appropriate. Evaluation of pupils' progress occurs through monitoring of class work, assessments, homework and by speaking to pupils. Additionally, pupils are interviewed about their progress and their targets for development while teachers are expected to participate in department discussion about progress in using the writing process.

(4,210 words)

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