

GRADUALLY RELEASING RESPONSIBILITY TO STUDENTS WRITING PERSUASIVE TEXT

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In this article, the authors describe a unit on writing persuasive text that took place in a fourth-grade classroom. The students benefitted from teacher modeling and from writing collaboratively.

The Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices [NGA Center] & Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010) emphasize three kinds of texts that students need to learn to write: argument, exposition, and narrative. Given that many teachers neglect the teaching of writing altogether (Beck & Jeffery, 2007; Coker & Lewis, 2008; Graham & Perin, 2007; Graham & Harris, 2005; Nagin, 2003; National Commission on Writing, 2003), or focus more on narrative texts (Daniels, 1990; Duke, 2000), this emphasis in the Common Core on writing means that students need

more experience with writing argument and exposition. Also, as Crammond (1998) argued, “mastery of persuasive writing is important because it empowers students—it enables them to produce, evaluate, and act on the professional, ethical, and political

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discourse that is central to our democratic society" (p. 230). Therefore, this article focuses on a model for the gradual release of responsibility to students when teaching persuasive writing, the less demanding form of argument that students should be learning in grades K–5.

The Common Core State Standards indicate that fourth graders are supposed to be able to write opinion pieces on topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons and information (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.1a). In our work with teachers, we have found that effective instruction involves teachers modeling for students how to write in specific genres or forms by writing *in front of* the students and writing *with* students through shared writing. Before asking students to write independently, they can also collaborate on coauthored pieces, which is especially helpful as a support to English learners as they write. Elsewhere (Read, 2010), this approach has been described as the IMSCI model.

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Briefly, the IMSCI model begins by immersing students in an inquiry (the "I" in IMSCI) about a topic or a text type. Then the teacher models ("M") how to prepare to write by generating a list or creating a concept map or using another suitable prewriting strategy. The teacher also models ("M") how to use the prewriting to generate connected text. As Donald Graves pointed out long ago (1983), "The objective of composing before children is to make explicit what children ordinarily can't see: how words go down on paper, and the thoughts that go with the decision made in the writing. Thus, the teacher writes so the children can see the words, and gives a running monologue of the thinking that goes with the writing." Throughout the modeling, the teacher can interrupt her own monologue and invite the students' input, thus making the writing a shared activity ("S"). Students are then asked to produce a similar text type by collaborating with a partner ("C") or working independently ("I"). This sequence allows for a gradual release of responsibility to the students.

Because students are not all familiar with every genre of writing, inquiry into the genre helps make explicit the features of the genre that they will eventually use in their own writing. Teachers may guide their students' encounters with the target genre with questions like, "What characterizes this kind of writing?", "What features are you finding these example texts have in common?", and "What voice does the author use to communicate their message?" While modeling writing in front

of the students, the teacher points out identifying characteristics that students noticed during inquiry.

Then, through shared writing, students are provided a safe space in which to try out the elements that are new to them, knowing that the teacher is still there as a guide and support. Collaborative writing releases more responsibility, but leaves a piece of the scaffold in place—the peer. Also, the more knowledgeable adult is still available to help during writing conferences. Finally, during independent writing, most of the responsibility is released to the individual student, but the teacher and peers can still provide support and scaffolding.

Although writing instruction is included in the curriculum at all levels of schooling, reports indicate teachers do not regularly give students opportunities to write and receive feedback in the context of classroom instruction (Coker & Lewis, 2008; Graham & Perin, 2007; Hillocks, 2008; Huot, 2002). Harris, Graham, Mason and Friedlander (2008) contended, "There are many reasons why students have problems with writing. One of the most obvious is simply that they've never been taught how to write" (p. ix).

Yet, these studies are concerned with writing instruction *in general*, whereas teaching writing for specific types of text, such as persuasive writing, occurs even less often. For example, Gilbert and Graham (2010) found in their national survey that teachers in grades 4 through 6 do not give much attention to persuasive writing and argue that persuasive

Pause and Ponder

- Think about the method for teaching writing that you currently use. How can you adjust it to include more scaffolding, such as teacher modeling, shared writing, or collaborative partnerships for your students?
- How can you use your classroom library to support the writing instruction of your classroom?
- What mentor texts do you have to support your students' inquiry about writing genres they need to write?

writing, along with other non-narrative genres, should receive a more prominent place in the curriculum. Because reading and writing are reciprocal processes, both benefit when students focus on the features of a genre (Tracy & Headley, 2013). Newell et al. (2011) suggested that integrating reading and writing instruction for argumentation will enhance the quality of both because students' arguments are influenced by the texts they read before writing.

In addition to the positive influence on both reading and writing processes when genres are studied, these authors (Gilbert & Graham, 2010; Newell et al, 2011; Tracy & Headley, 2013) also point to instructional factors that we used in this project, namely the use of scaffolds such as graphic organizers and collaborative writing. When genre study is combined with scaffolded models of instruction, there are positive results for students. Anderson's work in two third- and fourth-grade classrooms in contrasting elementary schools (2008) makes it clear that children are fully capable of writing persuasively when given scaffolding that includes talk, anchor papers, and instructional modeling.

Specifically, in their writing, these students "took stances, mounted reasons for their stances, composed sequential arguments, and addressed an audience" (p. 294). Not only do students become more able to write in particular genres when they are involved in genre study during writing instruction, but they also become more comfortable with using these types of texts for content area learning (Tracy & Headley, 2013).

The intent of our project was to explore the combined benefits of scaffolded instruction and genre study by test driving lessons that integrated reading and writing persuasive texts and

emphasized teacher modeling along with shared and collaborative writing.

The Writing Lessons

In collaboration with two fourth-grade teachers, Julie Moeller and Fallon Farokhi, we wrote lesson plans using the IMSCI model (see Figure 1) as our underlying framework, tying the lessons to science objectives for fourth grade, specifically the study of native plants, rocks and minerals, and erosion. We gathered persuasive texts for the teachers and students to examine in the inquiry phase as they defined characteristics of the genre, reading materials for the students to use when building background knowledge on their topic, and reading materials for the teacher to use when modeling. In addition, we created and provided a note-taking tool and a prewriting graphic organizer.

The lessons were based on the Common Core State Standards for

fourth-grade writing (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010), specifically:

1. Write opinion pieces on topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons and information.
 - a. Introduce a topic or text clearly, state an opinion, and create an organizational structure in which related ideas are grouped to support the writer's purpose.
 - b. Provide reasons that are supported by facts and details.
2. With guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, and editing.
3. Recall relevant information from experiences or gather relevant information from print and digital sources; take notes and categorize information, and provide a list of sources.

Figure 1 IMSCI and the Lessons at a Glance

I-Inquiry	As a class, teacher and students read three student examples of persuasive text together to chart the features of this genre. Teachers and students brainstormed reasons for having an opinion.
M-Modeling	Teacher modeled brainstorming reasons for their opinion using their own topic. Teacher read aloud to students from a selected article and demonstrated how to take notes to support their opinion on their topic. Teacher demonstrated paraphrasing, citation, and other research methods used when reading for information, and then she transferred this information to the graphic organizer. Teacher modeled how to use the graphic organizer as a plan for composing the rough draft of their persuasive text, using the think aloud strategy to demonstrate how notes on the graphic organizer could become sentences in the persuasive essay and how use to transition words.
S-Shared Writing	Teacher and students engaged in shared writing to take notes from the article on play, to write notes on the graphic organizer.
C-Collaborative Writing	Students worked in groups to read aloud to one another, take notes, add notes to their graphic organizers, and compose their texts.
I-Independent Writing	Following the process taught in class, students later selected their own topics and wrote a persuasive essay.

For the first lesson, in keeping with the IMSCI model, Julie and Fallon led the students in an inquiry into the nature of persuasive texts. They read and discussed three student-written persuasive texts and charted their features (see the Table for web addresses where the student-written persuasive texts can be found). The lesson plan did not attempt to provide a script for teachers to follow; Julie and Fallon facilitated this inquiry so that these fourth-grade students would develop their own understanding of the nature of persuasive texts. The students noticed that the writers of the essays often began and ended with their opinion. The students also noticed that the writers gave examples, or evidence, to back up their opinions. Fallon ended her inquiry lesson by asking, "Who has a reason to persuade me to go to recess?" One student said, "We need vitamin D!"

For the second lesson, the teachers focused on brainstorming reasons for having an opinion. For example, Julie began by saying, "Yesterday we made a list after our lesson about what it means to write a persuasive essay. What *does* it mean?"

Students responded, "You write about something to persuade someone to do something."

"Yeah! Great! We had great examples yesterday and we talked about the words fact and opinion. We have an opinion about something. What do we want our audience to do?"

Table Student-Written Persuasive Texts

Adopting a Pet from the Pound: www.thewritesource.com/studentmodels/we-adtpet.htm

Letter to the Editor: www.thewritesource.com/studentmodels/we-tchrdiff.htm

Don't Touch That Towel! www.eduplace.com/kids/hme/6_8/showcase/5-6/persuasive.html

"Do it! Agree with it!"

Julie responded:

Agree with it! Yes! Like "The Celtics are the best team"! But, we need facts to support our opinion. I can't just say they're the best. I need to prove it to you and provide evidence, like they've won 17 titles and no other team has done that. But now we need to talk about how to actually write something to persuade. I'm going to show you how to brainstorm reasons for your opinion.

Both teachers modeled brainstorming reasons for their opinion using their own topic, "people learn through play," which was selected beforehand. This topic was purposely selected to be science-related, but different from the topics about which the students would be reading and writing: (a) Native plants are good for the environment; (b) rocks and minerals are valuable resources; and (c) humans can cause erosion. After the teachers modeled brainstorming reasons for the opinion that people learn through play, the students met in small groups to brainstorm possible opinions and reasons related to their chosen topics. In one of the erosion groups, a student said, "Humans cause erosion when they climb because climbing makes rocks fall." These collaborative brainstorming sessions primed the pump for the next day's lesson.

The third day was focused on modeling for the students how to gather evidence, facts, and details supporting the thesis statement that the students chose. The teachers first modeled using their own resource, an article from *Odysey* magazine called, "Let's Play" by David Elkind. As the teachers read, they demonstrated to the students how they think as they read, take notes on their reading, and question their understanding of the text. They also talked about the author's engaging tone, how he speaks directly to the reader and even uses a

"[The teachers] led the students in an inquiry into the nature of persuasive texts."

somewhat casual tone, possibly to make the reader comfortable (Elkind wrote, "So, does that mean that you taught yourself how to speak? Well, sort of.>").

"Now we need to find more information. First you're going to watch me take notes with my topic, 'People learn through play.' I've got a place here for facts. If I'm going to be taking notes, do I need to write long sentences? What should I do?" asked Fallon.

"Read it. And then you're gonna write down the facts that you find in it in your own words," said one student.

Fallon continued:

Yeah, you're going to write summaries. How do I know which fact to write down? Just the ones that help me with my topic, right? I can also put a sticky note on places I want to come back to or I could put a star there to help me remember that it is an important fact that I want to include in my notes.

From the article, Fallon read aloud the following:

Babbling—making unintelligible sounds in an attempt to speak—presents one of the best examples of play as a learning experience. No one teaches a baby to babble. [She asked the students to demonstrate babbling.] But all babies, all over the world, do it—they repeat vowel and consonant sounds over and over. In doing this, an infant creates all of the sounds needed to speak any of the world's thousands of languages.

Then through a discussion with her students, they decided to write this in a short sentence in their own words:

“Babbling is one of the best examples of play because babies use those sounds to learn to talk.” Fallon said, “Did I have to open the magazine to write that? Do I have to use questions? Could I write the quote? Or can I paraphrase?”

One student asked, “What’s *paraphrase*?”

Fallon answered, “We took what we remembered and put it in our own words. You learn more when you paraphrase because you have to work through it in your own mind.” Then she modeled adding an exact quotation to her notes: “‘through banging, he discovers wooden spoons make a soft noise’ pg. 8.” They continued to read aloud parts of the article, and the students participated in deciding what to take notes about and how to write the notes, making this a shared writing experience.

The teachers also modeled how to write down the title of the resource(s) that they would be reading and from which they would be taking notes. One student said, “Yeah, we don’t want it to seem like we just made it up!”

After the minilesson, students worked in groups of two or three to read and take notes, reading aloud to each other from their own packets of information on their selected topics. These packets included excerpts on their chosen topics from readily available books in the teachers’ classrooms, references students had used in prior units, and teacher-recommended websites about these topics. Students wrote down facts such as “737 native plant species” and “native plants will provide food for wild animals.”

On the fourth day, the teachers continued modeling note taking from the *Odyssey* article and then provided time for the students to continue gathering evidence for their thesis statements from their own readings. They were reminded of the characteristics of the genre they were writing, the process of inquiry, and how

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to gather facts, reinforcing their growing understanding of the process of learning how to support opinions with evidence.

The next lesson focused on using a graphic organizer to make a plan for their writing that would explicitly link the reasons for their thesis to facts or evidence that they found in their resources. The teachers modeled using the graphic organizer with the notes they had taken in the modeled reading sessions, and the students participated as well so that it became a shared writing experience. Fallon said:

Let’s take a look. Babbling, banging, and tasting. Those are three examples of how babies learn through experimenting and self-directed play. So that can be my reason 1 with three facts as evidence. Do I have to have three? What if I only have two? Or what if I have four? I can borrow a bubble if I have more.

During the collaborative writing time that followed, the students worked in their small groups to fill out their own graphic organizers, using the notes from their own reading (see Figure 2).

The final lesson focused on modeling how to use the graphic organizer as a plan while composing a rough draft of the persuasive text. The teachers thought aloud about how to take the information from the graphic organizer and convert it into sentences, how to use transition words, and how to include facts that support their thesis. See Figure 3 for one teacher model. Note that in this model, Fallon uses some casual language that was deliberately chosen to appeal to a student audience and convey a friendly tone.

The teacher modeling of transitioning from notes on the graphic organizer to connected text helped the students understand this phase of the writing. In support of the thesis, “Erosions can be caused by humans,” Sophie and Tia had one reason on their graphic organizer that said, “Farmers don’t just help environment. They cause erosion.” The two facts they included to go along with this reason were “Farmers build” and “Farmers’ cattle eat grass and push dirt.” Their third paragraph of their final text was worded like this: “Second of all, farmers don’t just help the environment. They cause erosion. For example, the farmers build barns and houses, which causes damage to the ground. Also the farmers’ cattle can eat grass and push dirt, which will cause erosion.”

After all of the students had written first drafts of their essays, the teachers continued with the unit, teaching students to revise and edit and supporting the students as they published their writing in a manner of their choosing. They then allowed the students to choose their own topics for a persuasive essay that they would write independently, which is the intent of the IMSCI model—that after a highly scaffolded writing experience, students will be more ready and able to write independently in the same genre.

Evidence of Student Learning

Our intention with this project was to see how the IMSCI model supported students and teachers during a unit on

Figure 2 Persuasive Writing Graphic Organizer

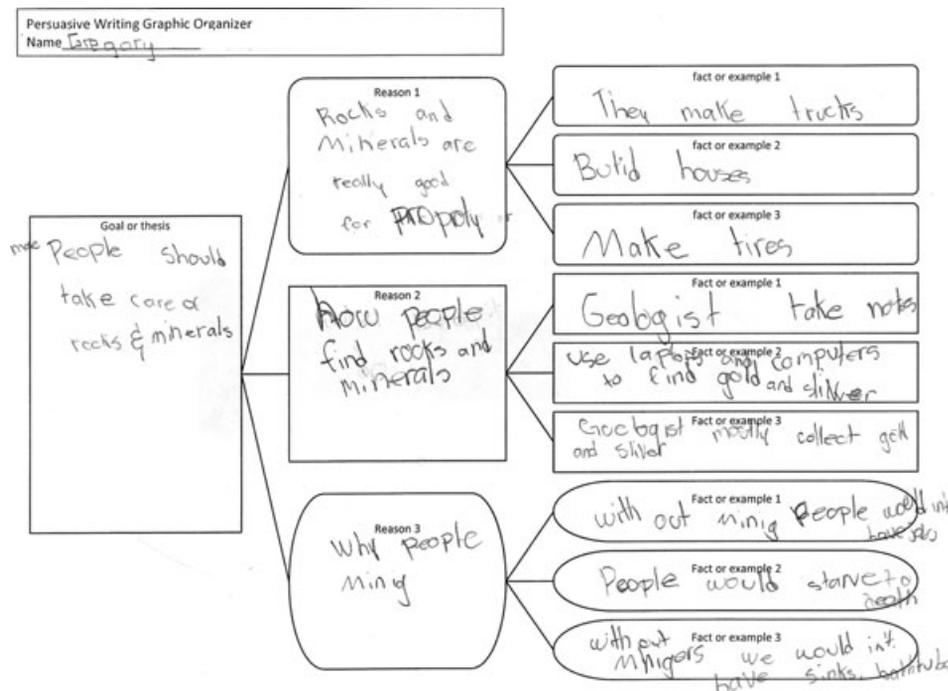


Figure 3 Teacher Model

"Boom! Slap! I win!" These are common sounds and phrases used when people are playing. Did you know that people actually learn through play? They are not just having a good time. Don't believe me? Read on...

First of all, playing helps you learn lots of things. For example, experience lets you learn what things are like. If a baby is banging a pot, it knows a pot is hard, and when a baby babbles, it is learning how to talk. Playing also lets you learn rules and learn to trust others.

Second, playing with others teaches you too. For example, when you play a board game like Monopoly, Sorry, or Battleship, you learn to read people's expressions. Also, the way I play will affect how others treat me. If I am unfair, no one will want to play with me.

In closing, playing actually teaches you things! The next time you are playing, think of everything you've learned. "Yes! Tag, you're it!"

writing persuasive text. A close look at the students' finished writing reveals that the inquiry phase and teacher modeling clearly influenced the way that the students wrote their persuasive texts.

Nearly all of the students used "first," "second," "first of all," "second of all," "the first reason," "the second reason" or "secondly" to begin the second and third paragraphs of their persuasive writing. The teachers had modeled this in their own texts. The teachers also modeled a closing phrase, and

about half of the students used "in closing" to begin their final paragraph. One group of students used "and therefore, my friends..." to begin their final paragraph.

The teachers also modeled making connections between reasons and facts that support them, and they modeled using a graphic organizer that was structured to make obvious the relationship between reasons and facts. The impact of this instruction is clear in the students' writing. For example, "Grass is

very important to the wildlife because it gives them food and it gives some animals shelter." Another example is:

First of all, people really do cause erosion quickly. For example, when people hike they make dirt fall off mountains. Also if people water plants too much they can get ruined because the dirt falls away from the roots and washes away.

These two examples are representative of what most of the students did to show the relationship between reasons and facts. It follows the model that the teacher provided, which uses "for example" to show the relationship.

The teacher created models, and the Elkind article about play also included the use of questions and second person, both of which serve to position the reader and the writer. For example, the teacher demonstrated the use of second person: "Experience lets you learn what things are like." Similarly, the students used phrases such as "you should

use native plants” and “we should protect these natural resources.” Questions are another way to directly address the reader. One wrote, “Did you know native plants grow faster and non-native plants don’t?” And questions were paired with answers written in second person: “Have you eaten salt? If you have, you’ve eaten a mineral.” Second person was used in conclusions as well: “So the next time you are hiking or watering plants, think of what you can make fall. Slide, crumble, bang! Think of these sounds you don’t want to hear.”

The teachers modeled using an authoritative voice in their writing, and the students were able to emulate that authoritative stance. The reading and note taking they had done helped them feel like experts, and they successfully used the information they gathered to support their thesis statement. To support their thesis that native plants are beneficial, students in one of the native plant groups wrote, “For example, Utah only has 6–16 inches of water from rain fall.” Another native plant group supported their thesis with “They also help wildlife by giving them shelter and food. Native grasses, shrubs, trees, need less water than most plants.” One group supported their thesis that rocks and minerals are valuable with, “Rocks and minerals are used for everyday items like: countertops, floors, and in the early days, grinding your food, making colorful paints and arrowheads etc.”

The students also emulated stylistic features. One of the teachers began her model text with “Boom! Slap! I win!” These are common sounds and phrases used when people are playing.” Many students, following her model, chose to include similar phrases. For example, at the beginning of a text on native plants, the students wrote, “Cough. Wheeze. Choke. These are similar sounds when an animal is eating an unnative plant.”

Another group of students wrote, “Slide, crumble, bang! Is that a person over there making that erosion?” Finally, “Yo, do you wear bling? It’s a valuable thing made from rocks and minerals like silver or gold” connects rocks and minerals to the pop culture term “bling,” and by using an appropriate choice of register (“yo”), this text demonstrates rhetorical and stylistic sophistication.

When we examined the students’ texts for structure, we specifically looked for a clear thesis statement. Every group’s text had a clear thesis statement, although in some cases the thesis was embedded in the title of their essay. The presence of a thesis statement can be attributed to teacher modeling, but it can also be attributed to the process by which students chose their topics. The topics they were given to choose from were stated in the form of a thesis. They didn’t choose from a list of topics; instead they chose from a list of thesis statements: “rocks and minerals are valuable resources”; “using native plants in your yard can help the environment”; and “erosion can be caused by humans.” In addition, the packets of information from which they took notes were labeled with these topics/thesis statements.

Benefits

This project using a set of lessons that scaffolded the process of writing persuasive texts was largely successful. The teachers felt the students benefitted from the sequence of modeling followed by collaborative writing and conferencing. Fallon said:

“Through inquiry and careful modeling and shared writing, students can internalize the characteristics of the genre more effectively...”

As any writing teacher knows, writing can be hard to teach, especially to young students. Thankfully, the IMSCI model makes it much more manageable to teach a specific type of writing. I mainly use the writer’s workshop approach with my classes so my students are used to this mode of writing instruction. It is especially helpful to those students who are usually intimidated by the whole process of writing, as well as to those students who find writing to be an easy task, but have difficulties in editing their drafts.

The best part about these lessons in my experience is the minilessons that drove the independent writing of the students each day. They were guided with authentic examples, which we dissected as the whole class. Finally, by watching me do each part of the writing process they were better able to do it on their own. I continue to use this approach because it allows for manageable scaffolding and success for all students. Also, because they began with an inquiry into the nature of persuasive texts, the students felt comfortable with it and adopted the persuasive stance with confidence.

Through inquiry and careful modeling and shared writing, students can internalize the characteristics of the genre more effectively and thus reproduce these characteristics in their own writing with greater ease. Additionally, research has demonstrated that model texts can be an influential scaffold for students (Knudson, 1991; Graham & Perin, 2007). This, combined with the model of a teacher writing, provides students with multiple exposures and increases the likelihood of student success. Additionally, those features that will be assessed in their writing become a part of their language when discussing text through inquiry, seeing it modeled

TAKE ACTION!

1. Identify a curriculum topic(s) that would provide a rich context for writing persuasive text.
2. Plan for the inquiry phase of the writing unit by identifying texts you can use as mentor texts to exemplify the kind of persuasive text you want students to write—letter, essay, and so forth.
3. Look for texts students can read and from which they can glean information to support an argument for a persuasive text.
4. Decide whether students will write collaboratively or independently, or a combination of both.
5. Spend several days examining the mentor texts with the students, charting their distinguishing features.
6. Model prewriting in the form of reading and taking notes on a topic similar to, but not the same as, the one students will write about. Conference with students as they prewrite.
7. Model writing a rough draft, thinking aloud about audience, purpose, and features of persuasive text that were charted during the inquiry. Conference with students as they write rough drafts, referring to the chart of features of persuasive text.
8. Model revising for accuracy, clarity, and features of persuasive texts. Conference with students as they revise.
9. Model editing for conventions and conference with students as they edit. Conference with students, have students peer edit, or otherwise support students as they prepare the piece for formal or informal publication.
10. Publish the students' work in whatever way makes sense for the form and topic, for example, letters are delivered to their audience, essays are published in classroom newsletter, blog, or bulletin board, and so forth.

by the teacher, and then collaborating together before writing on their own. Students were more involved in the process of writing and less worried about the product as a result of this increased confidence in their ability to write in this genre. Furthermore, research has demonstrated that many teachers do not teach writing directly and focus more on product than process; this scaffolded model, easily adapted to work with the study of genres, can provide teachers a framework for *teaching* writing rather than just assigning it.

We also noticed something that we hadn't planned for or built into the lessons. As we can see in Fallon's modeling of her research on play previously, these teachers used a register that was informal and familiar to the students, creating an affective environment that reduces anxiety and enhances motivation—a critical element in effective teaching (Dörnyei & Csizér, 1998).

This scaffolded instructional model takes advantage of the reciprocal nature of the reading and writing processes. Furthermore, when students read with this kind of focus on how authors have created texts, there is evidence that reading improves. Students pay more attention to the words in the text, the details in the organization, and the voice of the author as they identify characteristics of the genre in the writing piece that will inform their own construction of texts in the target genre.

Graham and Perin's (2007) recommendations for effective writing instruction identified elements of instruction that hold promise for improving writing ability, which could be combined in flexible ways to improve student writing performance. The IMSCI model as implemented in the lessons taught for this project incorporated 9 of the 11 recommended elements in an organized, scaffolded

model that integrated reading and writing processes, engaged students, and improved teacher efficacy. These elements included writing strategies, summarization, collaborative writing, specific product goals, prewriting, inquiry activities, the process writing approach, the study of models, and writing for content learning. This model holds promise for improving the writing instruction of practicing teachers, in turn leading to more proficient student writing.

Now that the Common Core has brought more emphasis to writing in the language arts curriculum, teachers may find themselves looking for methods and strategies that will increase their sense of self-efficacy for teaching writing. We believe that the IMSCI model described here holds promise for not only teaching persuasive writing, but for teaching any genre or form that students and teachers decide to undertake.

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MORE TO EXPLORE

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- “Genre Study: A Collaborative Approach” by Lisa Storm Fink. ReadWriteThink.org Lesson Plan. www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/genre-study-collaborative-approach-270.html
- The Reading and Writing Project: Book Lists and Classroom Libraries. readingandwritingproject.com/resources/book-lists-classroom-libraries-and-text-sets-for-students.html
- WritingFix: Writing Genres: Model Persuasive Lessons. writingfix.com/genres/persuasive.htm