



Teaching writing with EmPOWER

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Life before EmPOWER was difficult. I remember like it was yesterday standing in front of the class, stammering as I struggled to find the words to describe a concluding sentence, the proper format of an introduction paragraph, the best way to pre-write, or any other complex writing task. I would write an introduction on my own and try to note the nuances of my thought process as I wrote, hoping to articulate this process to the kids, only to find that I missed an important step somewhere in the middle. I would become anxious at the thought of working through with my classes the complex decision making writing well demands. I would even, forgive me, supply the kids with graphic organizers that stressed the graphic at heavy cost to the organizer (Looking back, it's hard to believe I asked students to write a paragraph in a hamburger). I knew there had to be a better way, but I didn't know where to find it.

I found a better way to teach writing in EmPOWER. I hope I don't sound like an infomercial for saying so, but taking the EmPOWER class has answered a great deal of my questions and put to rest all of my reservations about teaching writing. For one thing, it has put the right words in my mouth. This writing process has given me the language I desperately needed to discuss writing with students. This language has made my instruction more efficient by allowing me to indicate in the fewest number of words where students need to improve their writing while also giving me the peace of mind to know that the student will know exactly what I mean when I write, "Develop Say Mores in this paragraph" or any number of other comments. Learning the theory behind the method, specifically the importance of teaching beginning writers to conjure a mental image of their paper, improved my writing instruction dramatically. I developed an eye for many of the behind-the-scenes difficulties kids were having, difficulties that had to do not with grammar and spelling, but with managing the planning, organizing, holding processes necessary to create a text.

All of this information has improved my writing instruction, but it's the net effect of what I've learned that represents the most important development of my writing instruction: I'm not scared anymore. The anxiety of working through writing is gone. The most productive, interesting, fulfilling moments in my class came when I worked through puzzling writing problems with my students. We brainstormed ways to alter the wording of our paper's topic sentences to avoid sounding repetitive; we asked what our job was as we wrote an email to Bill Gates; we wrote awkward sentences, reworded them into slightly less awkward sentences, and, sometimes, we managed to grind out something concise and interesting. Listening to the kids wrestle with the language and their ideas, I felt the pride of a person terrified of heights overcoming his anxiety as he jumps off a bridge with a bungee cord attached to his ankles.



Overcoming my fear also allowed me to answer the question that haunted me in the early days of my teaching career: How could I teach kids about something that I hadn't totally mastered? The answer is that no one has mastered writing, and the sooner you admit that to your students, the better. I now know that teaching and learning about writing are slow-moving, never ending projects. The trick is to sell the kids on the journey, to incite their curiosity and willingness to take risks and try on foreign, uncomfortable ideas. Thanks to EmPOWER, I'll use my writing instruction to help students release their thoughts into the world instead of trapping them between two hamburger buns.

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