

THE WEB OF WRITING USING REFLECTIVE WRITING AS A LITERACY STRATEGY

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Brief History of Evaluation Findings

Reflective writing is a process by which an author writes imaginatively about his or her experiences, activities, and thoughts, with an emphasis on provoking spontaneity and awareness. A special component of the Finger Lakes Even Start grant, and a particular component of the Local Evaluator's tasks, was the introduction of "reflective writing" into the Even Start curriculum, with the production of writing samples that would be published in the program newsletter. Unfortunately, Family Educators moved forward with "reflective writing" prior to the hiring of the Local Evaluator and therefore without orientation or preparation. Family Educators communicated to the adult participants that they wanted parents to write "for the newsletter" and that others would read their "private writing." This created intense confusion and refusal by the parents to write for public consumption. The sense of the Family Educators was that reflective writing "was more for Even Start than for the consumer." Moreover, Family Educators stated that they did not know how to get their families to write. During the first and second set of interviews the Family Educators reported that only a small number of the consumers were writing, and those were, more often than not, reluctant writers. The writing that was being done existed either in few sentences written in a composition notebook or in small lists written on scrap paper.

Regardless, Family Educators expressed sincere interest in helping their families to write, and indicated a commitment to a well-conceived writing methodology.

Problem Assessment

Several obstacles diminish the effectiveness of current writing components in the Even Start program. Family Educators and the Even Start programs more generally, have not embraced reflective writing as a core component of an Even Start curriculum.

- Family Educators have not been trained to properly introduce reflective writing into their weekly home visits with families.
- Family Educators are not yet able to use reflective writing as an effective tool for teaching **reading** and **writing** skills to consumers and for learning and documenting the family's stages of development.
- Family Educators have not been trained to read and assess reflective writing nor have they been taught to see in the reflective writing that which will help them become better teachers.
- Most parent and child family members are afraid of writing as a skill and afraid to have their skill exposed to an audience.

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Solution

To address these issues, and to meet the requirements of the Finger Lakes Even Start local evaluation, we instituted a writing pedagogy. The process is well expressed by its name, “The Web of Writing.” The Web of Writing refers to the collaborative act of writing rather than a final finished product. Our philosophy of writing includes the pedagogy of writing rather than the evaluation of writing. Therefore the focus or emphasis of writing is on the conceptualization and the imagination of effective writing through reading, and effective reading through writing.

A pedagogy of writing in support of literacy treats writing as a playful mode of expression, without judgment, rather than as a communication obstacle. As a result, we proposed a plan to introduce reflective writing into the Even Start curriculum, and through a Writing Workshop.

A Web of Writing has four components:

1. **There is a critical link between reading and writing.** Writing supports the imagination and is a key communication building block, and reading models creativity, structure, and expression. Therefore the focus or emphasis of writing is on the conceptualization and the imagination of effective writing through reading, and effective reading through writing.
2. **The term “writing” refers to the collaborative act and process of writing** rather than a final finished product. There is a salience to the process that encourages the use of “peer educators” who can create supportive environments and enhance morale.
3. **The Web of Writing means that Family Educators act as mentors, and as models,** by writing along with the parent, writing along with the child, and encouraging the parent to write along with the child.
4. **There is a strong emphasis on writing as an “everyday” act** that can be spirited and playful. This means that writing in these contexts is non-judgmental (it is not a test).

Writing facilitates learning by helping writers explore, clarify, and think deeply about the ideas and concepts they encounter in reading. A goal for the consumer is to make sense of the learning material. A method of achieving this goal is through writing.

Writing forces the writer to think using background knowledge. With writing the consumer uses a different language to communicate. The more ways/ methods of communication, the more comfortable and familiar the consumer becomes with what they have already been taught. By writing the consumer can construct his or her own meaning of the learned material and transcribe it onto paper. The consumer can link new information with prior knowledge by sharing analogies.

Writing creates an active learning environment in which the consumer can respond critically or personally to what he or she is reading or learning.

The challenge from an instructional perspective is to create an environment in which they feel free enough to respond openly. Open response is necessary to evoke students’

feelings and thoughts. Evoking students' initial responses to a text are crucial to further exploration of the ideas they are encountering. Open responses, however, are not final responses. Thus, an initial response of "I like this" or "I hate this" becomes the springboard for other, more complex reactions. Why a student likes or does not like a text becomes the genius of discussions, art, and compositions that probe the reader's intentions.

The pedagogy has the potential to produce a higher level of writing very quickly and as a side benefit the writing samples used in the evaluation can be more substantial both in content and in quantity.

Objectives for a Writing Workshop

For reflective writing to be an effective tool in the Even Start Program, it first needs to be taught to the Family Educators so then they can teach writing to their consumers. The success of a reflective writing component in the Even Start curriculum comes first from supporting the Family Educators. This can be gained by understanding how reflective writing can be an effective teaching and learning method. The methodology of the workshop allows the participants to work individually and collaboratively to learn what it means to be a writer, what all writers face as obstacles to write, and what they need to do to make writing a successful part of the learning process.

A workshop can provide Family Educators with instruction, materials, and experiences from which to draw that will support them when they go out into the homes. In addition to the instruction, collaboration between the Family Educators will help each family work through ideas and problems together. Collaboratively, the Family Educators can adapt the reflective writing process to the needs of the curriculum already in place.

Workshop discussion involves four main issues of the writing process:

- Write in a journal notebook
By keeping a journal notebook themselves, Family Educators can understand what reflective writing means. The Family Educators then will be better prepared to answer questions consumers have about reflective writing.

Family Educators and adult participants can understand reflective writing no better than by doing it themselves. Journal notebooks do not take a specific form nor do they have requirements. Reflective writing can include anything on which the writer wants to reflect. However, to be a part of the collaboration curriculum, writers must be aware that others will read their writing. The form of the journal notebook is unique because of its openness to the particular needs of the writer and the moment. "Because there are no definitive rules, anything can be said, in any way the writer wants to say it." Writing in a journal notebook "can inspire one to take a leap in thinking and expressing, losing what is familiar and safe-even just for an instant."² Traditional styles of writing in a journal notebook capture day-to-day writing and self-help writing where a voice, a theme, and often an urgency emerges.

² Dresher, Olivia, Munoz, Victor, Darkness and Light: Private Writing as Art. ToExel, New York. 2000.

- Read reflective writing in a journal notebook
Because of the nature of writing, it is often hard for people to allow ideas to reach paper. Writing in a journal should be approached as a very sensitive issue. The writing in journal notebooks should not be graded or judged, but instead the writing should be read for ideas. When reading a journal notebook, look for ways and directions the writer can expand on his or her ideas. Family Educators can ask themselves, “Do the ideas in the journal writing connect with components of the Even Start program?” “How?” Use the answer to this question as a springboard into conversation with the consumer. The Family Educator can use the conversation as a method to introduce and to teach certain components of the adult literacy program. Reflective writing can guide a family to reach larger goals set with the guidance of a Family Educator.
- Respond to reflective writing
By responding to reflective writing, the Family Educators begin to understand what to ask when reading reflective writing. The “right question” does not penalize the writer. The right question asks the writer **how** and **why** something happened. This forces the writer to reread and revisit his or her writing. These questions require the writer to critique himself, and to re-think and to evaluate what he or she has written--developing the skill of analysis and synthesis.
- Inspire a consumer to write in a journal notebook
Family Educators can brainstorm possible writing topics **they** would want to write about and also imagine topics that would engage their adult consumers. This same exercise of brainstorming can also be carried over into a home visit session. It is the responsibility of the Family Educator that the writer does not feel he or she is being punished by having to write.

The consumer must feel comfortable, even playful so that they become inspired to write. One way to make writing become an integral part of this program would be by routinely ending each home visit by posing a question to the consumer tied to the reading or to one of the four program components. Giving the consumer something he or she has to reflect on and then write about strengthens an individual’s analytical skills and this is one of the ways that writing supports reading. In addition, this exercise carries over the educational experience from home visit to home visit. With this writing exercise the Family Educator will be building upon the ideas and accomplishments of each visit rather than starting new and fresh each week.

Expanding Web of Writing Resources

An additional component of the reflective writing curricular effort has been the creation of a “Peer Education and Community Partners” program to assist Family Educators. This involves the development of a peer education component and formal agreements with community partners such as America Reads, Literacy Corps, colleges and universities, and even high schools. In so many cases, Family Educators are already strapped to provide education services to families and to keep up with the administrative paperwork. A “web of writing” involves creating a web in which other support groups

engage the families, providing additional contact and stimulation, and additional coherence and supervision. This approach can include joining the Family Educator during the home visit, visiting the home in the absence of the Family Educator, or providing services in a center-based approach. Beyond the usual screening, there must be an effective training program that “makes connections” for the volunteer by creating sensitivity for difference, an awareness of the “isms” (racism, sexism, ageism, and classism, to name several), and an attitude of non-judgmental support. There must not be extraneous factors which compromise the interaction between consumer and provider.

Implementing a “web of writing” is not a one time effort. Such a program requires continuing instruction of the Family Educators and volunteers about the reflective writing process. A reflective writing pedagogy explicitly separates writing from the Local Evaluation task, but implicitly can create a quality of participation that results in families volunteering to publish samples of their writing! In this regard, appropriate assessment can involve writing portfolios that can be evaluated by professional staff. In this way, the consumer will see the progress they have made as authors of materials that they can read and share with others.

Main Benefits of a Writing Curriculum

The main benefit of introducing reflective writing into the Even Start curriculum is to provide Family Educators with the opportunity to chart the learning progress of the consumer. Family Educators will also be able to chart the progress of their teaching by seeing progress in the participant’s writing. Reflective writing is important in this program because reflective writing discovers the author behind the writing. Who a person is can be explained no better than by their own written work. Writing can enable the Family Educator to learn more about the consumers by discovering the consumer’s concerns and what he or she finds is difficult or easy about the Even Start Program. As the adult becomes more comfortable with writing as a discourse method, he or she may use the journal notebook as a haven or as a place to vent, and the Family Educator will be able to connect what is happening during the week with what is happening during the weekly two-hour home visit learning sessions. Understanding the private and public situations of the consumers will allow the Family Educator to tailor the Even Start program to his or her needs.

Reflective writing is one form of communication. By establishing this special kind of written communication, the Family Educator will be able to connect what is happening in the consumer’s private life to his or her public work. This is important because the Family Educator can then address the written difficulties and concerns in the private work of their writing to the public work of the weekly home visits. During the home visits the Family Educator will be able to address the concerns of the consumer by addressing the goals of the program: integration of early childhood education, parent empowerment and life skills, and parent literacy, and adult education.

WEB OF WRITING WORKSHOP

Prepared by Harris Consulting Associates

Discussing the “Writing Assignment”

I. Initial Reactions

- ◆ How did you feel when you received the assignment and realized you had to write?
- ◆ Were you afraid that your writing it would have to be shared with the group?

II. Beginning the Process of Writing

- ◆ How did you begin writing?
 - What materials did you use?
 - When did you write?
 - Where did you write?
 - Did what you write depend on what you knew about your audience?
- ◆ What was difficult about writing this assignment?
 - What was it like starting with a blank page?
 - How did you feel about not having a specified length?
 - Were there expectations you felt obligated to fulfill?
 - Were you worried about proper spelling, readability, or having to censor the content as to not disappoint, shock, or offend the audience?
- ◆ Did you expect Jack and Holly were going to write along with you?
- ◆ Why would it be important that Jack and Holly write with you?
- ◆ Why would it be important that Family Educators write with their families?

II. Some Points on an Even Start Writing Curriculum

1. Keep writing simple. Both Family Educators and consumers feel they do not have extra time for writing.
2. The quality of audience support is critical in encouraging writing.
3. There must be different strategies used for different writers.
4. Use brainstorming techniques, such as outlines, lists, words, and sentences.
5. Be playful. Encourage the writers to just do it!
6. Specified lengths, grammar correction, and insistence on a particular subject create a sense that writing is a test. Especially in the early stages, emphasize process over length, content, grammar, and mechanics.
7. Collaborative writing creates partnerships, and builds relationships.
8. There is great benefit in writing during the family visit.
9. Use a range of exercises, and vary the methods of eliciting writing (Let’s describe..., Tell me about..., If I were a millionaire...)
10. Writing is not a one time activity. Think of each piece as a draft, and go back and re-write pieces.
11. Use affirmation, and follow-up questions that can help clarify and extend the writing.
12. Create a safe space – there is no right or wrong “answer.”
13. Use writing as a cathartic experience.
14. Schedule the writing to make use of the consumers “best time of the day.”
15. Provide external support, but motivate so that the value of the writing is internally driven. Let the writer own his or her writing.
16. Reading the writing out loud is useful in affirming the writing, and supports reading and speaking.