

A Writing Problem is a Thinking Problem

Elementary through high school classrooms are filled with assignments requiring written expression. Some of our students are very bright but unable to express themselves through written means. While we can make accommodations by allowing them to dictate their thoughts to another person or parent that may calm the problem down in the moment, this still does not teach a student to express themselves in writing.

Written expression requires motor planning, social thinking, organizational skills, spelling, grammar and punctuation to dance together simultaneously. If any one of these factors gets left out we end up with a poor example of written expression. We know that one of the great challenges of kids with social learning challenges is multi-tasking or executive function skills.

Our kids feel overwhelmed and angry about having to deal with something that so completely overwhelms them. **Some of the worst behavior problems I have observed in the classroom were set off by requests for the student to write.**

"How is social thinking part of the written expression process?"

In order to produce reasonably good written expression students need to realize someone else is going to read what they write. They are writing for an audience, meaning they should be considering (by 4th grade) what the reader is thinking and feeling when they read what the writer has written. They should adjust their writing to help the reader understand their thoughts. This requires not only knowledge that people have thoughts that are different from our own (basic Theory of Mind concepts) but also that they can narrate a story across time and/or sequence so the reader can follow and make reasonable conclusions to avoid confusion (this is called narrative language).

They also have to recognize that people move from ideas (gestalt or main idea) to thoughts (details). To help the reader, the writer has

to organize his information so that he introduces his idea and then support it with a reasonable set of thoughts (details).

To help organize our thinking and sort out our main ideas from our related thoughts/details, we have a habit of brainstorming. Most of us learn to do this type of thinking in our heads, but for our students, who have difficulty staying focused and holding their thoughts together their thinking becomes a destructive storm, quickly getting fragmented or tangential.

And then we have all those other things to think about...

Many, many kids I work with from elementary school through high school, and even college, have behavior issues around writing. From full out tantrum to stubborn refusal, they struggle with something educators predict they should be pretty good at based on their intelligence and even some of their academic achievement scores!

....and then there are older students I have worked with for years who have significant writing problems and have received years of specialized services but they still cannot write a paragraph about information they are not inherently interested in.....

When do we also recognize that students with diagnoses on the autism spectrum and many with ADHD have difficulty with organizing their thinking, creating language that demonstrates they are thinking about what other people are thinking and even recognizing how other people form their own thoughts and emotions. All of these concepts and skills are at the core of written expression. So what to do?.....

Thus, we should work on teaching our students the social thinking and organized thinking that is a precursor for writing and temporarily stop having students produce paragraph or essay length written expression. The reason to temporarily stop the writing of passages is to teach students they can learn to think without

feeling so totally overwhelmed that they are blowing out with their behaviors when asked to do this task.

But, they are not "off the hook"; they are going to work on ways in which they can improve at the thinking. Some examples of what we can help teach include:

1. Teach them how we brainstorm information related to the topic we are going to write about. Most 2nd grade students learn about "brainstorming" through the use of what are called "graphic organizers", "visual organizers" or "mind maps". This lesson needs to be extended for our students and taught much more extensively. While most neurotypical students brainstorm invisibly inside their heads, our students get lost inside their heads and become distracted by their internal thoughts. Therefore they need to work on how we brainstorm externally on paper by creating these visual diagrams. For an example of these look to:

Schroeder, D. and Hansen, S. (2008) Pathways for Learning; Visual Organizers to Heighten Academic Success. Language Pathways, Inc. Chesterfield, Missouri. <http://www.slisgooden.org>

There are many folks who have developed products to teach about visual or graphic organizers, including books for elementary school students. Seek out more information on this by Googling this topic.

2. Learn to tell the difference between ideas or what we call in writing "main ideas" and how these are different from "details". As easy as this sounds, even our very bright students can struggle with this. This is apparent in their conversational language as they are very tangential in what they talk about and don't seem to connect to the main ideas of the conversations they are engaged in.

3. Work on pruning their thoughts they brainstorm by creating written outlines to serve as guidance for their work.

4. For high school students, learn how to talk understand what an "opinion" is. Many students I have worked with struggle with the idea that they would have to write about one side of an argument

when they can see both sides. For example, they can understand both sides of the debate on the death penalty, so they refuse to write anything. How is it that we can share our opinions verbally or in writing without totally believing that what we say is completely "right".

In order to teach these skills, we have to more intensively focus on these concepts. To motivate students to engage at this level of thinking and showing their thoughts by creating visual structures such as graphic organizers or visual outlines, we would provide them a grade for there production of these visual thinking supports. Thus, rather than receive a grade for the final written product, they would receive a grade for creating the graphic organizer and then the outline, etc. Or for being willing to explore how to brainstorm ideas related to how to represent opinions, or for exploring how people's words impact how other's think and feel as they read the essay.

As they improve in their core ability to think and then understand why we write, reintroduce the larger act of written expression slowly, positively reinforcing the steps along with way. While many may think this is too non-traditional an approach given that so much writing is expected in the class and students cannot easily get "out" of this task, realize how much time you spend with this child cleaning up his behavior problems related to writing. Are you really saving time by asking this child to write?

By allowing them this time to work on thinking away from working producing written work allows all of us to re-focus and tune up the core skills of writing. However, do not think we are going to teach these "thinking skills" to mastery. " MGW