Six Traits Writing in the Buffalo Schools

BY JIM COLLINS

The name "Six Traits Writing" refers to an approach to writing assessment and instruction built on the notion that writing performance can be measured and enhanced through attention to six main criteria: Ideas, Organization, Voice, Sentence Fluency, Word Choice, and Conventions. The approach is becoming extremely popular both locally and nationally, probably due to its ties to both assessment and instruction. In this age of standards-driven educational reform, an approach to writing which unifies assessment and instruction is bound to be popular, especially since so many of the standards-based assessments in New York and elsewhere use writing as the primary means of assessment across the major content areas. One positive aspect of teaching to the new assessments has been renewed interest in programs to improve the teaching and learning of writing, and Six Traits Writing has been the program of choice for many districts.

For three years I have directed a professional development program in Six Traits Writing in the Buffalo schools. The program focuses on helping teachers to develop writing strategies for the six traits of writing. Writing strategies are the mental procedures writers use to solve problems they encounter while writing. Planning before you write is an example of a writing strategy, and so are deciding to start a new paragraph, adding words to a sentence to clarify meaning, and pausing in mid-sentence to correct a spelling. These writer's actions are not accidental, but rather the result of familiarity with the workings of written language. For experienced writers, writing strategies tend to operate below the limen of consciousness because the thinking procedures involved in writing are relatively automatic, that is, until we encounter difficulty—when the topic of writing is sufficiently challenging, we all become conscious of the strategies we're using. The benefit here is that experienced writers can spend more cognitive energy on generating and shaping the content of writing, because the tools and structures of written language come readily to mind to serve their thinking as they write.

Novice writers, on the other hand, have it doubly difficult. They have to not only think about the content of writing, but about the tools of written language as well. This is why struggling writers have so many questions about form and function—What can I say about this topic? How many words? How do I begin? Do I need a title? How do I spell _____?

In our program in Buffalo we use the six traits of writing with teachers and students to clarify, organize, and focus writing assessment and instruction. Simply stated, the Six Traits approach makes a highly complex cognitive activity more manageable by breaking it into six related components. And *six* traits of good writing seems to be a good number; writing teachers generally agree that the criteria of good writing include *content, organization,* and *conventions,* and to that basic list they usually add other criteria, as when the New York State assessment rubrics break *content* into *meaning* and *development* and add *language use* to arrive at five qualities of good writing—*Meaning, Development, Organization, Language Use,* and *Conventions.* These five correspond well with the Six Traits—*Ideas, Organization, Voice, Sentence*

Fluency, Word Choice, and *Conventions*—because the Six Traits model also defines *Ideas* as both generating and developing content, and because *Voice, Sentence Fluency,* and *Word Choice* clarify the meaning of *Language Use* for students. Thus Six Traits, thus, helps make the expectations of teachers, administrators, and the state assessments visible to students.

Another valuable part of the Six Traits approach is the close connection among assessment, instruction, and learning built into the model. One connecting is found in the set of rubrics accompanying the traits. The materials we use in Buffalo, taken from the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL), include three sets of rubrics for each trait, which we call "kid-friendly," "student-friendly," and "teacher-friendly," respectively, as an indication of grade and audience appropriateness. Each rubric exists in four- and six-point versions, with each score point defined and illustrated through a series of bulleted items. NWREL favors a five-point scale in its publications, but we don't use that because it's not consistent with New York's assessments where both four- and six-point scales are used. As with the six traits themselves, these rubrics help make the expectations of teachers and administrators and the New York State assessments clear to students.

Taken together, the traits and rubrics are the heart of the Six Traits model. They clarify and illustrate what good writing is for both teachers and students, and when taught one trait and rubric at a time, they organize instruction and learning to make the complexities of writing more accessible to students.

A bit of the history of the connection between writing assessment and instruction in the development of Six Traits may be relevant here. In the mid-1970s writing assessments were developed in response to open enrollment in colleges and the consequent need for placement testing, in writing and other areas such as math, for entering students. Two methods of writing assessment, among many which had been used in writing research for decades, became popular: holistic and analytic. Holistic scoring was based on quick readings of whole essays in accordance with a single rubric, which carefully defined four to six levels of overall quality. Analytic scoring was based on readings for separate but related characteristics of good writing, usually these five: ideas, grammar and usage, organization, wording, and style, with point values assigned in that order. Each characteristic had a separate scoring guide, again with four to six carefully defined levels of quality. Holistic scoring gave one score for overall writing performance, and colleges favored that assessment approach because it was economical and reliable enough for placement decisions. Analytical scoring also resulted in a single score, but it was the sum of the separate scores for the main characteristics of writing it measured. When it was affordable, analytic scoring was chosen by colleges because it told so much more about what was going on in the writing of students being tested than did holistic scoring. New York uses a version of analytic scoring on the state assessments for the same reasons.

The characteristics of good writing used in analytic scoring were not new. Indeed, they go all the way back to classical rhetoric. Only the names have changed—for example, in ancient Greece *purposes* for writing were called *modes of discourse*; the trait of *Ideas* was called *Invention*; *Organization* was called *Arrangement*; and *Style* included *Sentences* and *Diction*.

With the advent of the National Assessment of Educational Progress writing tests, a compromise between holistic and analytic scoring called Primary Trait Scoring came into vogue. Each purpose for writing was thought to have a primary trait; for example the primary trait for persuasive writing was *logical argument*. It's not far from there to the realization that logical ideas are characteristic of all good writing, and this is probably where the notion of traits of good writing had its origin. In the mid-1980s a group from NWREL, working with teachers from Oregon and Montana, developed a performance-based writing assessment and an instructional approach to go with it called *Six Traits*. Their thinking was that all writing, certainly all school-sponsored writing at least, shares six primary traits—Ideas, Organization, Voice, Sentence Fluency, Word Choice, and Conventions—and therefore these should form the basis of assessment and instruction. Shortly after that the NWREL folks split into two groups, Vicki Spandel's group ("6 Traits") and Ruth Culham's group ("6+1 Traits"). I'll continue to refer to them as one approach, since we've combined them in Buffalo.

The Six Traits approach we're using in our project with the Buffalo Schools borrows from these two originators, and from three other major movements in writing instruction over the past thirty years: the process approach, the workshop approach, and the cognitive strategies approach. We advocate teaching Six Traits within a framework of process-based, workshop-style writing instruction; that is, we want teachers to focus on each of the qualities of good writing in a setting that emphasizes writing processes (planning, drafting, writing, revising, and editing), and workshop collaboration and scaffolding (students produce writing while teachers and peers confer with and assist them).

To all this we add writing strategies. Here we use the word *strategies* in its goal-directed sense: strategies are choices people make from available resources to achieve an end (another concept from ancient times; indeed, the word *strategy* has its roots in the Greek word for *army*). Cognitive science often uses problem solving as a metaphor for thinking, and in literacy research from a cognitive-science perspective, researchers use the term *cognitive strategies* to describe the thinking students do to solve problems they encounter while reading and writing. In our project, we think of this problem solving in terms of mental procedures which are characterized by certain ways of thinking that help make reading and writing processes successful and efficient. These successful and efficient ways of thinking about solving problems while writing are what we call *writing strategies*. Part of our work is to identify strategies, which comprise the thinking students may use to solve problems encountered while reading and writing.

What all this means is that we use the six traits to organize lessons, activities, exercises, and strategies to help students improve in writing and in writing for the new assessments. We advocate moving one trait at a time through the traits of good writing, and one score point at a time up the developmental scale comprising the scoring guides for each trait. Throughout all this we pay particular attention to writing strategies, those mental procedures successful writers use, because that's where control of the writing process is to be gained. If a third grader, for example, learns that the trait of Ideas includes the use of "good, juicy details" to obtain a high score on the rubric, the student has learned about writing; if the student provides some "good, juicy details" when reminded by the teacher, the student has learned to write with scaffolding; if the student next has the phrase "good, juicy details" pop into her head right in the middle of writing a sentence and then adds appropriate

details, the student has learned a strategy to write to develop ideas. Each of these types of learning entails greater control and independence in the production of meaning with written language. And that's our goal.

Our Six Traits Writing program in Buffalo is sponsored by the Western New York School Support Center at ERIE I BOCES and GSE's Dean's Office. To date, we have trained more than 800 Buffalo school teachers in the Six Traits approach. Last summer additional funding from the Buffalo Schools allowed us to bring in Ruth Culham, one of the original authors of Six Traits I mentioned above, to train 25 additional trainers of teachers.

In addition to this general infusion of six traits methods throughout the Buffalo schools, the program supports three doctoral students who each work intensively in three schools. This work focuses on a combination of professional development and research on writing about reading.

Writing about reading is an extremely important area for research and teaching. Tasks that require students to write about texts are ubiquitous at all levels of schooling and assessment. At the same time, research on reading comprehension and research on writing make little mention of validated interventions for helping children to develop abilities for writing about text. Both reading and writing, furthermore, can be difficult for struggling comprehenders, and discovering ways to help them is an urgent matter for teachers in these assessment-driven times. If achievement is frequently measured by having students write about reading, and performance for low-achieving children depends on reading and writing, then teaching students to use writing to make sense of their reading is indeed a serious educational objective.

Our Six Traits writing program tackles this problem one trait at a time. Within a framework of process-oriented, workshop-style writing instruction, we help teachers to create lessons and writing strategies, and then we study which lessons and activities work best and for whom. The doctoral students working with me in the Six Traits Writing Program are Corinne Kindzierski, Kim Leavitt, and Pauline Skowron. This year, Corinne is working in Martin Luther King School, Kim is in Frank Sedita School, and Pauline is in Herman Badillo Bilingual Academy.

The research component of this program has already produced one completed dissertation and another is underway. Two grant proposals and dozens of tested writing strategies have also come out of the work, and I'm currently writing a book on the lessons and strategies we've developed. Associate Professor Catherine Cook-Cottone (from the Department of Counseling, School and Educational Psychology) and I are developing the theoretical model combining writing traits and writing strategies, and also analyzing the writing, which students from one Buffalo elementary school produced for state assessments as fourth and eighth graders. In this research we are examining the writing for developmental patterns in features of written language at levels of text, syntax, cohesive ties, and words.

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