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Squirrely Students Inspire Structure and Style

By Andrew Pudewa

The year was 1948. Tall, young James Webster stood at the blackboard, writing as quickly yet legibly as possible a sentence dictated to him by one of his grade 8 students. He was implementing a new idea for teaching composition presented at the previous summer's teacher training—collaborative writing. The idea was this: If students write the piece together, they will be more engaged, and the group effort should help bring up the struggling writers in the class.

Although it was only his fifth year teaching, Mr. Webster had some reservations about this newfangled approach. For starters it seemed to him that it was always the same few students who volunteered to speak out, the quiet ones "riding on their coattails." Additionally, he noticed that even though students were free to say whatever they wanted in their own rewrite, the process tended to result in thirty identical papers. Furthermore—and much to his chagrin—writing whole sentences on the board with his back to the class resulted in an increase of aberrant behavior: spit wads, passing notes, and covert reading of contraband comic books.

How could he teach as required yet keep an eye on his students? He began to experiment. Instead of writing a whole sentence as dictated, he would just put three or four words—the key words— separated with a comma. Next sentence, next line, three words. It worked well. Not only was he able to monitor student activity in between words, he also quickly discovered that providing only short hints of the sentiment of each sentence greatly improved student engagement and creativity when rewriting. The collaborative idea did provide content and for many solved the "I don't know what to write" problem, but at the same time the "key word outline" limitation required all to develop their own wordsmithing skills. This approach became the seed of what we now know as the Structure and Style™ methodology.

He also noticed that while most students did decently well in writing up their science experiments, many of them struggled when writing stories, being stuck at the "Once upon a time, there was a … " point. At Christmas he visited his aunt, Anna Ingham, an experienced first and second grade teacher in Saskatoon. On her coffee table he found a little stack of papers, her students' stories, all of which were well written and interesting.

"Aunt Gertrude, how did you get your kids to do this?" he asked with incredulity. Penciling out her "Story Sequence Chart" on a napkin, Mrs. Ingham explained that students need structure to know what to do next; otherwise they get lost. Her little chart provided just that.

Webster returned to his class and created a unit on writing narrative stories using a three-paragraph model parallel to the science report format they were already familiar with. Part one would describe the characters and setting (rather than the hypothesis and equipment), part two would relate the conflict and action (similar to the procedure of the experiment), and part three would tell the climax and resolution (parallel to the outcome and scientific conclusion). This three-part model worked splendidly; suddenly students were writing interesting, engaging stories they could be proud of.

He continued developing "units." Noting how his students enjoyed comic books (which he dutifully confiscated when discovered), he cut out pictures from the seized sources and gave them to the students, dubbing it "Writing from Pictures," which he found greatly aided imagination and creativity in writing. When he discovered a 1907 grammar and composition text among his mother's books, he realized that not only could he show his grade 8 students how to write organized high school level essays, he could give them composition checklists with specific techniques that would require them to use—not just identify—in their writing the grammar concepts they had been learning.

At the end of that year, the superintendent came to administer achievement tests. Webster was nervous. The students were unprepared, but took the tests anyway. Later, the superintendent called and asked him, "What have you been doing? Your students did extremely well!" Relieved, the young teacher explained that they really hadn't followed the government curriculum all that much, but they had done a lot of writing. How did he achieve such success? An older, now retired Dr. Webster explains, "Writing requires thinking, and if students think well, they will sail through achievement tests. Teaching this program isn't always easy, but it absolutely works."

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