

In order to select the Module 3 indicator that would have the most impact on my teaching and instruction for active learning during the writing block and beyond, I began by having a conversation with my mentor regarding my current classroom instruction, highlighting both strengths and areas in need of improvement in my classroom. We discussed my pre-existing means of collecting, analyzing, and utilizing specific data in order to differentiate my teaching during instruction to meet the diverse needs of all of my students and increase student performance and engagement. We analyzed how I currently use data to plan and drive my instruction in my first grade classroom. Through this conversation, it became apparent to me that although I differentiate instruction throughout the day, there are many more ways to adapt my writing instruction to meet the diverse and ever changing needs of the students in my class.

I noticed that each time I conducted a conference with a student, I would ask them to show me what they have done so far on the piece they were working on. I would compliment them on something they have done well on and try to pinpoint one or two areas in need of improvement to discuss with the student. We often spent a lot of time refreshing each other's memories as to what we had previously discussed. As a result of this, I found myself only meeting with one or two students per day, and feeling as though we did not accomplish as much as we should have in the time spent together. Many of my more advanced writers were meeting with me very infrequently, if at all, because much of my time was spent with the struggling students. Because of this, it was evident to me that I had to examine my current practices and research ways to improve upon my differentiation during the writing block in order to maximize student performance and engagement in learning.

I began my learning by working with my mentor to select a variety of resources that would support my growth and success across the continuum by learning to monitor student learning and adjust teaching during instruction. The first resource I utilized was observations of experienced teachers in my school during writing instruction. Because our entire elementary school conducts Writer's Workshop daily, I spent between twenty and thirty minutes in four different classrooms during their writing block. I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to observe one kindergarten class, two first grade classes, and a third grade class. This experience gave me a chance to see experienced teachers adjusting their instruction to meet the individual needs of their students, and I was able to take away many useful lessons for my own teaching as a result.

Due to the fact that our school's writing block is constructed around Lucy Calkins Common Core Writing curriculum, my other two resources

utilized for new learning about the problem at hand came from two of the books that she wrote. My mentor and I selected chapters six through eight in *A Guide to the Common Core Workshop: Primary Grades*, by Lucy Calkins, for me to read and determine how to apply the lessons I learned to my writing instruction in my first grade class. These chapters explain management systems, mini-lessons, as well as differentiating feedback when conferring with individuals and small groups by breaking down each part into manageable segments. Calkins states that, "It is during writing time that you are free to support, scaffold, and foster students' growth as writers in whatever ways seem most important for each individual writer." (p. 50) Therefore, much of the success of writer's workshop relies on motivating and teaching students to be engrossed in their writing, so the teacher is free to assist and conference with individual student's instructional goals in mind, rather than focusing on the management of the class as a whole. Reading and taking notes on these chapters' overarching guidelines really aided my application of the specific lessons I carried out throughout the unit.

The second Lucy Calkins book I employed to guide my planning and instruction during the writing block was the book *Writing Reviews*, by L. Calkins, E. Dunford, and C. Dangler Larkey. This book maps out the opinion writing unit about writing reviews that all first grade teachers are expected to use when teaching writing. It contains instructions for teaching eighteen sessions to first graders about how to judge and write persuasive reviews on a variety of topics, an essential skill to their future academic success. The CD that accompanies the Lucy Calkins Writer's Workshop resource kit contains student examples, anchor charts, student checklists, and teacher rubrics. I used the teacher rubric for first grade opinion writing to assess my students' level of understanding and opinion writing ability before beginning the unit, and again at the end of the unit to determine the growth they had made.

When beginning our second unit of writing about opinions, I took with me many lessons of what worked and did not work from the first unit of study on small moment stories. I realized that although I had given a pre-assessment, I only used that data to compare with the post-assessment to determine each student's progress. However, through professional discussions with my mentor and experienced teachers that I observed, it became evident to me that I had to use each student's opinion writing pre-assessment as a guide to plan instruction and small groupings based on areas most in need of improvement. The rubric identifies grade level standards of writing pertaining to structure, development, and language conventions that align with the Common Core. After asking students to compose an opinion piece before the start of the unit, I scored each piece according to the rubric and organized my data according to which students

needed the most improvement in each category. Doing this gave me insight as to which students to meet with to address the specific needs. For example, I had four students who scored a zero in the spelling category, indicating that they were not yet able to accurately use grade level words and spelling patterns throughout their paper. Because of this, I decided to pull these students aside during writing time for further instruction and guided practice in spelling. As a result, the spelling accuracy of these students increased significantly, making their pieces more fluid and easy to read. Using the specific data this rubric has provided me with, in addition to monitoring progress through observations, has helped me to adjust my instruction with more specific, distinguished goals for each student in mind.

Each Writer's Workshop block begins with a mini-lesson before the class is sent off to write while the teacher conferences. Chapter seven of *A Guide to the Common Core Workshop: Primary Grades* outlines the importance of a ten-minute mini-lesson with students seated next to their long-term partners, as close to the teacher as possible. Prior to reading this chapter, my mini-lessons often dragged on for close to thirty minutes, leaving very little time for conferences while students write, and often cancelling our share-outs at the end of the writing block. Through reading this chapter I discovered that "mini-lessons are meant as intervals for explicit, brief instruction in skills and strategies that then become part of a writer's ongoing repertoire, to be drawn upon as needed." (p. 59) Each mini-lesson is broken down into three parts: Connection, Teaching, Active Engagement, and Link. Even though each session in the *Writing Reviews* book is several pages long, it is meant as a guide to be adjusted and tailored to fit into ten minutes. This ensures that the teacher is delivering a clear teaching point that serves as the important writing lesson of the day, driving each student's independent writing time.

Upon straightening out my understanding of the purpose and structure of the mini-lesson component of Writer's Workshop through my readings, I have worked to shorten my whole-group lessons to be more concise and direct, while making sure to incorporate all four components of the mini-lesson. Using the "Management Systems" chapter, I make sure to end each lesson with a structured transition and an encouraging "Off you go!" shift into writing time. In order to maximize productivity and increase time spent conferencing, I often have students put a finger on their nose when they know what they are going to begin working on immediately upon returning to their seat. I also often ask writing partners to share a goal for the day with each other. At times, my first conferences of the day are with students who are unsure how to start a new piece or add to a work in progress. My students have benefited from this because some have needed help with brainstorming techniques and goal setting. Adjusting my instruction based

on the end of the mini-lesson has also positively impacted my students because some of them may need a little more coaching on the day's lesson for them to fully comprehend it, and their productivity has increased as a result.

After sending students off to write, that is when the majority of the differentiated work and teaching can take place. I learned that with better organization of materials and explicit teaching and modeling of how to problem solve without a teacher's assistance during writing time, students work more rigorously with greater independence. I observed an alphabet linking chart taped to the writing folders of several students in another first grade classroom to assist them with the sounding out of the words they want to write. After seeing this I followed suit with several of my lower level students and English Language Learners that need that extra support to work more independently of the teacher. Additionally, I taught my class to "ask three before you ask me", and to be brave spellers instead of interrupting a conference. The students have responded very well to these rules and procedures because they now understand that when it is their turn to meet with the teacher, they would not want to be interrupted by their classmates. In previous units, I had several students that would constantly interrupt my conferences for minor questions, and I have now witnessed a substantial decrease in these types of interruptions. These small alterations to the structure of the writing block have had a significant impact on my class's ability to self-manage and make the most out of their time, while allowing my conferences to run more smoothly and be a more valuable use of time for everyone.

Chapter eight of *A Guide to the Common Core Workshop: Primary Grades* discusses the framework of a productive, differentiated writing conference. Calkins breaks it down into four phases: "Research what the child is intending to do and has done. Decide what to teach and how to teach it. Teach using one of four methods, each of which usually ends in guided practice. Link by extrapolating from today's work whatever it is that the writer will want to carry forward into tomorrow's work." (p.73) Prior to my new learning, the majority, if not all, of my time spent conferencing was depleted solely in the research phase. I would often sit with a student, read through their work together, and then we would try to figure out what we discussed the previous time to determine if he or she need more help or can move on to a different area in need of improvement. I knew this was not the most constructive use of time, but was unsure how to fix the problem.

When I visited a third grade class during Writer's Workshop, I observed the teacher making use of a tabbed notebook while conferring with a student one-on-one. We discussed the use of this notebook following her

conference, and she explained that she has a tab for each student in which she jots notes down and updates consistently. We talked about how this information helps her monitor each student's progress and adjust her instruction as a result. Beginning to keep my own class binder with information on each student certainly boosted the productivity of every meeting because organized information on each individual is right at my fingertips whenever needed. As a result, I've been able to successfully reach all four conference phases that Calkins suggests. This has made one of the most significant impacts on my students' success and productivity in writing because we are able to quickly review what was already taught, starting on a positive note. I use the last few notes I took on each student to tailor our conference to their needs. First we celebrate something they are doing very well or have improved upon since the last time we met. We then work on one area still in need of improvement, and I send the student off eager and excited to become a better writer by working on their individualized goal that we set. When meeting with one student, I noted that our previous conference was centered on the conventions of punctuation. Amy was writing full sentences, but not using punctuation to show where one sentence ended and another began. Before deciding what we would focus on this time, Amy and I celebrated the improvements that she had made since we last met. Amy is now able to indicate the end of each sentence with very few errors.

Another important lesson I learned to help with my goal was from the twelfth session outlined in Lucy Calkins' book *Writing Reviews*, entitled "Partners Work Together to Give Writing Checkups!" The goal of this session is to teach writers that writing partners read each other's writing and use an editing checklist to give feedback on how to make their writing better. Calkins states that "you'll want to teach students within their zone of proximal development, rather than pushing students to adopt a practice that is well above the skill work they're ready for." (p. 92) She continues by talking about pulling a small group of students who all needed a lesson on capitalization and hoping that at the end of her small-group meeting, each student would go back to his or her writing table and share what they had learned with the students at that table. From this I learned that small-groups and even partnerships should be altered at times to meet the specific needs of the students in the class.

Another lesson I learned from my research was about flexible grouping. My students each have a writing partner. However, when it came time to do the paired writing check-up lesson with my students, I decided to switch a few pairs around based on the classroom observations I had seen and the notes I took during conferences. This served to be much more purposeful and useful for my students' individual areas of strengths and

weaknesses. I was able to pull a small group of students, while other pairs of students helped each other in ways that were just as beneficial, if not more, than if they had met with me. I have since continued to use more flexible grouping, and have seen the immense productivity resulting from this. When teaching a lesson about review writers anticipating disagreements, I had students requesting to work with peers who had opposing views so that they could use their verbal rebuttals to strengthen their own opinion piece. In most cases I allowed this and the results were exceptional.

Upon analyzing the results of the post-assessment given at the conclusion of our opinion writing unit, it is clear that my students have made more gains in this unit than in previous units. Prior to completing this module, only four of my seventeen students were using transition words in their writing. By adjusting and monitoring my teaching during instruction, I was able to meet with individuals and small groups to address this deficit. Upon analyzing the results of the post-assessment data I was pleased to notice that fifteen students are now using transition words in their writing. Additionally, my post-assessment data demonstrates a significant improvement in the category of elaborating with detail. At the start of our opinion-writing unit, only five students were starting to use detail. At present, all but one student are elaborating with detail, and to a much greater extent than they were when we commenced.

Through my research and the assistance of my mentor, I have learned a lot in regards to monitoring student learning and adjusting teaching during instruction in response to student performance and engagement in learning tasks. The changes that I have made as a result of my new learning have had a very positive effect on my students and the learning environment in my classroom. I have truly seen how differentiating my teaching during writing instruction has helped me reach my goal of increasing student performance and engagement. I intend to continue collecting, analyzing, and utilizing specific data to monitor, adjust, and differentiate my instruction throughout future writing units and hope to see the same success that I did in the opinion writing unit.