My Kids Can't Write, K–5

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How to Advance Achievement Through Cross-Curricular Writing

Paul Emerich France

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Contents

Key Terms

Many of the terms we will use throughout this book are used broadly and colloquially. For the purposes of this book, we will use the following terms in the ways described below.

cognitive writing	a pedagogy that engages students in the process of writing about learning, offering students the opportunity to write across all subjects in order to synthesize learning in their own words
journal	a blank notebook in which all cognitive writing lives; blank notebooks house open-ended tasks where students can express their thinking in various ways and come to differing conclusions
journal entry	a response to an open-ended task
sentence stem	the start of a sentence, usually one to three words, intended for students to copy, after which they complete the sentence in their own way
scaffold	a temporary support that carries the cognitive load for students; can be defined in terms of front-end, back-end, distributed, or peer scaffolds (Frey et al., 2023) that are eventually faded away
writing structure	a multi-step prompt that is intended to support students with elaborating, analogous to Project Zero's See-Think-Wonder (Ritchhart et al., 2011)

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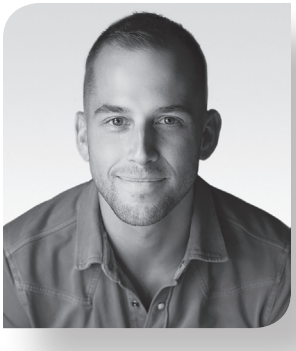

Paul Emerich France is a National Board Certified Teacher, reading specialist, and author of five books on teaching, including *Reclaiming Personalized Learning: A Pedagogy for Restoring Equity and Humanity in our Classrooms* and *Make Teaching Sustainable: Six Shifts Teachers Want and Students Need*. He is also the author of Educational Leadership's monthly column, "Make Teaching Sustainable." France has authored well over forty articles and blogs for various publications, including EdSurge, Edutopia, the International Literacy Association, and The Learning Professional.

Paul spent ten years as an elementary school teacher, working with students in grades transitional kindergarten through fifth grade. He has experience in both public and independent schools, and now serves as a consultant and coach, working with teachers to both humanize their teaching and make it more sustainable, finding practices that benefit students, meanwhile helping teachers find sustainability in their workloads. In 2023, he founded *Make Teaching Sustainable*, an organization committed to helping schools find sustainable practices. Paul also hosts the *Make Teaching Sustainable* podcast, which can be found on all major streaming platforms.

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Introduction

On the Science of Reading—and Writing

I sat across the table from the reading interventionist in my then school, my blood nearly boiling over. After all, I had done my due diligence: I brought writing samples, running records, as well as phonics, phonological awareness, and spelling assessments. If one thing was clear, my student needed intervention, but because her standardized test scores were "too high"—and because of a prevailing ideological disagreement—I could not, for the life of me, get her the support she needed.

To me, the evidence was clear: because the school did not have a systematic approach to teaching phonics and morphology, students were coming to me in third grade lacking in word knowledge. Many students were unable to break monosyllabic words into phonemes, while others struggled to spell high-frequency words that could be spelled phonetically. To me, the problem was clear: My students had not learned to read using the Science of Reading research that had been available for decades, research I had been privy to as I pursued my master's in language and literacy to become a reading specialist. Teachers had, instead, subscribed to a method of teaching reading and writing that neglected these core skills, opting for a whole-language approach, resulting in word callers, dysfluent reading, and many, many learners who could neither spell—nor write—with fluency.

The great irony of the Science of Reading movement is that so much of this research is *not* new. It's simply been neglected and ignored, and for what purpose, I can't quite be sure. That's not to say that building a culture of reading and writing isn't important; it's that this culture of reading needs to be supported by a culture of proficiency in basic literacy skills: phonics, phonemic awareness, morphology, and spelling to name a few.

Conversations about writing are not as prevalent as they should be in these conversations around the Science of Reading. It's a missed opportunity, as the Science of Writing is clear: Students who learn how to write well will become better readers, too (E. Shanahan et al., 2024; Graham, 2020). We mistakenly assume, however, that students need to have full command of the writing system before they are equipped to write. This simply isn't true, though: Writing, even at the earliest of ages, offers students opportunities to apply their knowledge of phoneme-grapheme correspondence, strengthening pathways in their brains and

increasing the likelihood that students will retain knowledge of phoneme-grapheme correspondence, applying them to their reading. In fact, Ouellette and Sénéchal (2017) suggest that students who use inventive spelling to write in the early grades will become better readers as a result of applying their knowledge of phoneme-grapheme correspondence. This, of course, assumes that systematic instruction in phonics is happening, along with the necessary feedback to gradually guide these inventive spellings toward the correct ones.

The word *orthography* comes from the Latin *orthos*, meaning "correct" and *graphein*, "to write." Quite literally, when we teach students English orthography, we are teaching them how to "write correctly," not for the purpose of perfectionism or control, but for the purpose of making writing easier and more efficient for them. While we mustn't get lost in the weeds of correctness, especially with our youngest learners, the truth of the matter is this: If we do not teach our students how to navigate the English writing system, and "write correctly," for lack of a better term, they will flounder, not just in writing, but in their lives.

Despite the fact that the notion of "learning styles" has been largely debunked, teachers still shy away from engaging students in writing as a core mode of expression in classrooms, citing that "students learn in different ways" and implying that writing is a learning style or non-preferred modality. This is likely due to the fact that writing is scary and challenging for adults, but our apprehension to holding students accountable to writing in our classrooms is only exacerbating this problem that our students can't write. Or at least they can't write . . . yet.

Graham and Hebert (2010) of Vanderbilt University assert the marked benefits of writing on reading skills in *Writing to Read: Evidence for How Writing Can Improve Reading*. "Writing about a text should enhance comprehension because it provides students with a tool for visibly and permanently recording, connecting, analyzing, personalizing, and manipulating key ideas in text," noting that in 93 percent of outcomes, researchers saw positive outcomes when students write about their reading. Additionally, summarizing through writing will strengthen reading skills over time (E. Shanahan et al., 2024; Graham, 2020; Hattie, 2023).

The problem is that the *illusion* of writing is happening in most classrooms. Because genre-based units of writing are the dominant flavor of writing instruction, students have become accustomed to teachers guiding them through these long-form pieces, often over scaffolded and more indicative of a teachers' ability to write than their students'. That's not to say that these genre-based units don't have value: Kids certainly need opportunities to pursue long-form pieces to completion. That said, if we connect with the authentic purpose of writing in modern society, it serves the purpose of interpreting information, sharing our perspectives, and using writing to communicate needs effectively. Long-form, genre-based

pieces are a small portion of this in daily adult life, while on-demand, cognitive writing will be the vast majority of what students *really need* to be able to do.

There is ample evidence to suggest that the benefits of writing expand far beyond improved outcomes in reading, though. Research on generative learning (Fiorella & Mayer, 2016) and writing across the subject areas further corroborate the moral and scientific imperative for incorporating writing into everyday instruction—and across the disciplines.

It begs the question, if the evidence base is there, then why aren't teachers embedding writing into instruction more often? Certainly, it would be hard to pin down one influencing factor, but it stands to reason that teachers' confidence with writing, curriculum mandates, and a lack of professional learning around writing contribute to teachers' reluctance to incorporate open-ended cognitive writing into their content. First, many teachers do not see themselves as writers: They fear, and in some cases, even *hate* writing. It makes them feel vulnerable; it reveals their insecurities and imperfections. Second, mandated curricula either underemphasize writing or over-scaffold it, providing students with fill-in-the-blank questions, as opposed to open-ended prompts. Many teachers are required to follow these curricula to "fidelity," making it challenging for teachers to modify instruction and incorporate more cognitive writing. Finally, writing is underemphasized in professional learning, likely due to the fact that it is not tested in the same ways that reading and mathematics are. But what the research shows is clear: Writing about reading—and writing about any subject students are learning—will increase the likelihood of retention (Graham et al., 2020).

It's, like, science. Isn't that cool?

With this scientific imperative comes a moral one. Our students deserve an education that teaches them essential skills, with writing being one of them. Writing is, after all, a way of being, a uniquely human behavior that has played an integral role in human evolution. And it will continue to play this role for humanity. Therefore, we have a responsibility to provide our students with far more opportunities to write in our classrooms—and to hold students accountable for it. The path forward is cognitive writing in learning journals, and so I hope as we begin this journey into cognitive writing, that you'll be both brave and creative, dreaming of a more effective way to teach our students—a method that is not only grounded in the science but also grounded in the humanization of our teaching.

Similar to the Science of Reading, the Science of Writing is *not new*. We have known this for years, with reports as far back as the1980s substantiating the importance of writing to improve reading outcomes (Weber & Henderson, 1989) and calls for writing reforms in the 2000s (National Commission on Writing, 2006). As a result, we have no excuse anymore.

We can neither ignore the research nor the compounding calls to emphasize writing instruction in our schools.

It's clear our kids cannot write–and it's time we do something about it.

"Stop and Jot" Questioning: What are your hopes and dream for this book? What are you hoping to learn after previewing the table of contents?

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Three Reasons to Begin Cognitive Writing

1

Let's begin by defining a couple of key terms. *Cognitive writing* refers to a pedagogy that engages students in the process of writing about learning, offering students the opportunity to write across all subjects in order to synthesize learning in their own words (Goodwin & Rouleau, 2023). In mathematics, students may write about the methods they pursue to solve a problem; in science, students might reflect on key terms, describe processes, analyze the root cause of a challenge, or even develop a theory in response to a phenomenon; in the arts, students might reflect on an artist's choice of color or explain why they chose certain elements in their own work of art; even in PE, students might write about their successes and failures while pursuing a new physical endeavor. Cognitive writing takes place in *journals* or *notebooks*, whatever you choose to call them. For the purposes of this book and our work together, I will refer to them as journals.

While students can be encouraged to write about daily events, thoughts, and feelings, that will not be the focus of our work together. This is often what comes to mind when people hear the word *journal*. Over the course of our time together, we will identify rituals, scaffolds, and structures that will systematically support students in learning to write while simultaneously writing to learn across any discipline within the school day. Journals will serve as places for students to grapple with, process, and reflect on lived learning experiences within the classroom through open-ended tasks, prompts, and problems. When brought to life with consistency and integrity, they become containers for sequences of learning tasks that have the capacity to evolve into a learning narrative, unfolding in real time as students take risks, make mistakes, and synthesize new ideas.

It's a bit scary, at first, to take this leap into cognitive writing—for both learners and teachers. It's common for teachers to be resistant. After all, industrialized, worksheet-driven learning is what many of us knew growing up. Many of us construct our own story of success within this style of teaching, and therefore, began our careers teaching in this way, myself included. Consequently, we likely find unconscious comfort in the transactional nature of processing worksheets for point totals and percentages. *If it was good enough for me*, many will think, *then it will be good enough for my students*.

But let me ask you this: Was it *actually* good enough for you? Or did you have the tools and/or gusto to rise above the industrialization of schooling to construct the success you're experiencing today? Did worksheets and workbooks *actually* work for you, or did you reach a point where you realized industrialized, worksheet-driven learning only got you so far, forcing you to *finally* think on your own?

Even if you feel like it *did* work for you, compliance-driven pedagogies are working for fewer and fewer learners nowadays. Our culture—and our kids—have changed. While we are looking for students who know how to work within collective classroom agreements, engaging in a respectful and humanizing culture of learning, we are no longer looking for students who all think and learn in the same way. Our values have changed, and with good reason. We need learners to think critically and operate with a developmentally appropriate amount of independence.

As a result, we should not be implementing pedagogies simply because they were "good enough" for *some* of us growing up. We should be striving for something greater—not a form of teaching and learning that we must rise above or act in spite of in order to succeed, but instead a form of teaching that acts in concert with these new values.

This form of teaching doesn't have to be a *dream*. In fact, this is the *reality* of cognitive writing in the classroom. It is possible to enact this in your classroom, school, or school district, even within the constraints of our standards-driven, data-focused system. Doing so will provide multiple benefits. First, it will build writing fluency, which is critical among a generation of students who struggle to write. Second, it's sustainable. It's great for student learning—and for teachers' workloads. Best of all, it's equitable, creating culturally sustaining pathways for all types of learners to succeed.

Writing Fluency

Perhaps the most obvious reason to start journaling is simply that it gets kids writing more in an effort to build writing fluency. T. Shanahan (2022) recommends reading and writing throughout the entire school day to build writing fluency, including across different subject areas. He says it should be a "go-to activity" across the curriculum, reinforcing the idea that it should be a *way of being*, in the classroom, not just a time of day.

Sadly, in the best of scenarios, writing is usually limited to a time of day where students engage in genre-based units of instruction, producing a perfected (and often overly scaffolded) piece of writing over the course of four to six weeks. This is not writing as a way of being; this is writing as a means for performance and perfection. Students will only become writers if writing is a way of *being* in our classrooms, as integral to learning as classroom discussion and inquiry. Writing is, after all, a part of who we are as human beings. It's not a "learning style" or "learning preference";

it is an *essential* part of what makes us who we are as a species, and therefore, it should be embedded into everything we do.

Writing fluency refers to the speed, accuracy, and prosody with which learners write. *Speed* can be measured by the number of correct writing sequences per minute; *accuracy* can be measured in terms of spelling, grammar, syntax, or coherence of ideas; and *prosody* can be observed qualitatively, evidenced by the smoothness with which learners write.

We must be mindful when using these measurements as success metrics, as success metrics have the capacity to unintentionally distort the processes they are intended to monitor (Campbell, 1979). While one can take baseline writing fluency data using a curriculum-based measurement (CBM), this data must be triangulated, using qualitative classroom observations and longitudinal reflections on student writing both individually and through PLCs (see chapter 9) to gauge how learners' writing fluency evolves. This allows teachers and learners alike to tell a more thorough story of writing growth over the course of a school year, supporting this growth with regular feedback on performance to ensure growth (Koenig et al., 2016).

Growing writing fluency requires more than simply building speed, stamina, and prosody; it necessitates focused instruction in foundational skills to build accuracy, including letter formation, spelling, and vocabulary acquisition (see chapter 7). While cognitive writing should emphasize the process over the final product, we cannot discount the importance of students finding proficiency with English orthography when building writing fluency. It is, after all, intuitive: if learners have not demonstrated proficiency in the structure of our writing system, then how can we expect them to write fluently? They will expend far too much cognitive energy wondering how to spell new words, construct and punctuate sentences, and form their letters—just to make their writing comprehensible. What's more, a lack of proficiency in the structure of the English language will just make learners frustrated, causing them to disengage from writing altogether.

"I want you to know spelling, grammar, and punctuation," I say to students, "because it will make writing easier and more efficient for you. It will ensure your readers *understand* what you are saying. We want our readers to understand us, right?"

This messaging reframes what success looks like in writing. Correctness is not a means for serving tests or other compliance metrics; a developmentally-appropriate amount of correctness provides a pathway to making writing easier, more enjoyable, and accessible to everyone.

We mustn't overlook the significant role writing can play in helping students co-construct and retain new learnings, as well. Research suggests that writing in mathematics, social studies, and science can "reliably enhance learning" (Graham et al., 2020). The authors encourage mindfulness, ensuring that writing prompts are matched to clear learning

objectives (see chapter 3 and chapter 8) and that teachers are regularly reviewing the results of writing prompts in order to adjust instruction (see chapter 5 and chapter 9). This does not mean, however, that writing to learn should take the form of traditional notes where students copy from the board. Instead, this entails using cognitive writing as a means for engaging students in generative learning experiences within their journals.

When students engage in generative learning experiences, they receive presented information and make sense of it by organizing it into something new. Generative learning applies eight different strategies: summarizing, drawing, mapping, imagining, self-testing, self-explaining, teaching, and enacting (Brod, 2021; Fiorella & Mayer, 2015. All of these generative learning strategies can be applied to cognitive writing.

Summarizing presents itself in cognitive writing as students summarize stories they've read or consolidate learning through reflections and new learning statements. According to *Visible Learning*, a meta-analysis of over 2,100 studies related to achievement, summarizing has a high effect size (n=.62), meaning that it has the "potential to considerably accelerate" learning (Hattie, 2023). *Stop and Jots*, which we'll explore in later chapters, provide prompts for students to summarize and capture new learnings. Summarizing through writing will strengthen their reading skills over time (E. Shanahan et al., 2024; Graham, 2020); self-reflection and self-judgment will increase the likelihood that learners will retain and apply new learnings, with an effect size of .81. *Drawing* can serve as both a supportive scaffold and enhancement of learning experiences. Emerging writers may need to draw and label before writing sentences; drawing can also serve as a means for clarifying ideas, making models, and communicating conceptual knowledge in math. *Mapping* involves organizing information into concept maps. Hyerle's *Thinking Maps* (1995) serve as a consistent and reliable set of eight concept maps that students can apply to various contexts. *Imagining* happens when students generate their own methods or responses to prompts or tasks (see chapter 3), underscoring the importance of choosing open-ended tasks and prompts that allow for multiple methods, pathways, and responses (Boaler, 2015; Cohen & Lotan, 1997, 2014). *Self-testing* occurs in mathematics when students attempt solutions to problems using methods and tools of their choosing, in science when students posit theories in relation to phenomena, and in all other disciplines when they share ideas and revise them upon reading the journals of their peers and, as a result, revising them. *Self-explanation* happens regularly, with students explaining their thinking in response to a math problem or substantiating an argument using evidence and reasoning. This also has a high effect size (n=.54). *Teaching* occurs through discourse during points of convergence within a lesson where students share methods and responses, providing feedback and deliberating on which responses are efficient, accurate, and logical. Finally, *enacting* occurs regularly as students connect to the background knowledge they are building from previous lessons, meanwhile

using concrete objects or actions to demonstrate understanding of a story or make sense of a mathematical, scientific, or social situation.

"Stop and Jot" Reflection: How often do your students write on demand? How fluent do they appear to be? Please write in complete sentences, rewriting the sentence frame, since this is what you will need your students to do.

- My students appear . . .

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Sustainability

In *Make Teaching Sustainable: Six Shifts Teachers Want and Students Need* (2023), I offer six mindset shifts for making teaching more sustainable. These mindset shifts entail humanizing learning by creating space for students' voices and identities; embracing collectivism and collaborative learning; building learning environments where students feel empowered to make decisions; planning and preparing for instruction in an intentional and minimalist manner; emphasizing the process of assessment over the product; and finally, flexibly responding to student needs as they arise in the classroom. Cognitive writing allows us to do all of these.

When students respond to tasks and reflect in their own words, we humanize their learning and allow their voices to tell the story of their learning journey. By using points of convergence for discourse and collaboration around open-ended tasks, we allow our classrooms to be collectivist. Cooperative learning and classroom discourse also have high effect sizes, according to *Visible Learning,* at .53 and .92, respectively. Learning environments that embrace cognitive writing are inherently empowering for learners, as they are encouraged to connect to their background knowledge and make informed decisions, using the tools at their disposal to access content and share their thinking. Planning and preparation is also minimalist in the cognitive writing classroom, as teachers need to only prepare one open-ended task and a learning menu for each lesson. Cognitive writing emphasizes the process of learning *over* the product, as students are encouraged to reflect on strategies and learning habits, in addition to reflecting on the academic content itself. All of these factors combine together to create a rich story of student learning in the classroom, allowing teachers to respond to student needs by scaffolding academic content, executive functioning skills, student discourse, and

the process of cognitive writing itself through rituals (see chapter 4) and language (see chapter 6).

Central to understanding each of these mindset shifts is acknowledging the importance of sharing the energy demands of learning with students. When teachers carry too significant a portion of the cognitive load in classrooms, it not only lessens opportunities for students to engage in co-constructed, generative learning, it also burns teachers out. For teaching to be sustainable, teachers must shift the onus of making meaning onto students, with teachers still being an arm's length away to provide scaffolds in the moment, as needed. Cognitive writing does just this in a developmentally appropriate manner.

Sustainability work interweaves itself with equity goals, as this emphasis on partnership, community, and the co-construction of learning supports our collective efforts to help students become independent learners (Hammond, 2014). While it does, in fact, make teachers' lives better when they share the cognitive demands of learning with students, it also builds independent learning skills within students, gradually building their self-awareness and self-advocacy by teaching them how to use their voices, ideas, and strategies to respond to novel problems, tasks, and prompts. Additionally, the process of cognitive writing will ask them to regularly reflect on their learning, further contributing to the aforementioned self-awareness, which will ultimately contribute to an ever-evolving conscious knowledge of self, further fueling their ability to become effective decision-makers in the classroom.

"Stop and Jot" A-ha Moment: How sustainable is your current approach to writing on demand? What makes it unsustainable? Please write in complete sentences, rewriting the sentence frame, since this is what you will need your students to do.

- My current approach . . .

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Equitable Learning

The work of a teacher is to meet all students' needs in the classroom. This is the definition of equity—when all students' needs in the classroom are met. Before we discuss how journaling meets all of these needs, let's define what these needs actually are. While it's important to take academic level into consideration, we must first consider basic

human needs like psychological safety, a sense of belonging, and a positive self-image (Maslow, 1943). These factors matter just as much, if not more, than finding tasks within students' zones of proximal development. In fact, this is precisely where theories on *personalized learning* fall flat. Many believe that in order to personalize learning, each child must be provided with a curriculum that is tailored to their individual academic needs. However, this is unsustainable, neither best for kids nor teachers (France, 2022, 2023). When we individualize curriculum in an effort to personalize learning, students work in silos, each one working on a different activity. This unintentionally tracks students, exacerbating opportunity gaps, as students who score lower on initial placement tests are afforded access to content much lower than their on- or above-grade level peers. It also limits possibilities for student discourse. After all, how are students supposed to sustainably learn in community with one another if they are learning different things? And finally, it's too much work for teachers. Teachers who work in classrooms where students are all in different places or are working on something entirely different struggle to meet the needs of all their students, either because the demands of planning are too high or because they struggle to intervene in the moment as students encounter challenges on individualized activities. We need more sustainable solutions for instruction that still meet learners' needs.

We can find sustainable solutions to meeting all students' needs by drawing upon the work of culturally sustaining pedagogy, universal design, and complex instruction, all of which work together in cognitive writing, moving us toward a vision of simultaneously more sustainable and equitable schools and classrooms.

Culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2017) leverages asset-based instruction and student voice to validate the lived experiences and background knowledge of students. Traditional worksheet-driven teaching or other teacher-driven practices do not do this. These pedagogies often center correct answers and procedural knowledge, while culturally sustaining pedagogy considers students' identities in the process of designing curriculum, assessing learning, and learner-driven instruction that creates pathways for all students to succeed.

Open-ended tasks offer a solution for culturally sustaining curricular resources that can be simultaneously geared toward a given standard or learning objective, meanwhile flexible enough to allow for varying solutions, interpretations, and methods for solving a problem or responding to a prompt. This is culturally sustaining because it provides students opportunities to bring their assets and background knowledge into the curriculum. For instance, in one cognitive writing sample you'll see later on, a first-grade student wrote about his dad taking him to the barber shop after learning about different types of tools, a razor being one of them. He connected the lesson to his lived experiences, and just like that, he had something he could write about.

Open-ended tasks also embrace the notion of universal design, where there are multiple means of engagement, representation, and action/expression (CAST, 2018). This means there are varied ways for students to enter the task, respond to the task, and express their reflections in community with others. It's important to note that a task delivered in isolation, though designed with all students' needs in mind, will not necessarily be effective for learning without several key elements: humanizing assessment practices, classroom instruction that anticipates the various responses and expressions of understanding, and a collectivist classroom culture that ensures all voices can contribute to learning, especially those who have been marginalized by a culture that values standardized testing over the dignity and humanity of all students

Equitable assessment practices include clearly articulated learning goals through student-friendly rubrics, as well as means for students to articulate the stories of their learning journeys, as opposed to the aforementioned transactional nature of grading and assessment where teachers' voices and quantitative metrics are centered, dominating the narrative of student success. Learner-friendly rubrics help us strike a balance between the metrics to which we all are beholden, meanwhile bringing students into the process, helping them to internalize these learning goals and find pathways to proficiency, albeit with support from their teachers (see chapter 5). This pedagogy of cognitive writing is not asking you to forget about mastery of grade-level standards; we all know too well that these metrics are consequential, and we must collect valid and reliable data on them. All cognitive writing is asking us to do is be open-minded to other ways of working within a system of standards and standardized metrics, making space for student voice in the process. Students can find this voice through self-reflection, self-evaluation, and self-reporting, all of which have high effect sizes on student learning (Hattie, 2023), meanwhile working toward equity goals by centering their voices, experiences, and ah-ha moments in the process of assessment.

Equity, however, is realized through the moves teachers make in the classrooms to proactively include all students in instruction, meanwhile responding to students, in an effort to direct and redirect students to efficient, effective, and logical ways of learning within the classroom. Proactive strategies are best illustrated through the cognitive writing rituals you will build with students in chapter 4, strengthened by both front-end and distributed scaffolds (Frey et al., 2023) in chapter 6, all of which are synthesized through a convergence-divergence lesson structure (see chapter 8). These strategies and the lesson structure itself is inspired by Cohen and Lotan's complex instruction (1997, 2014) where students engage in open-ended tasks through collaborative discourse and proactive teacher moves that promote inclusive instruction by actively removing barriers to learning for historically marginalized students.

"Stop and Jot" A-Ha Moment: Whose needs are being met by your current writing instruction? Who are you having trouble reaching? Why do you think that is? Please write in complete sentences, since this is what you will need your students to do.

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Toward a New Definition of Success

The impetus behind journaling inspires us to seek a new definition for success in our classrooms, one that helps us envision an innovative and more humanizing way of teaching, while still maintaining a grasp on reality. No matter your opinion, we are still beholden to the success metrics that govern our students, their learning, and our livelihoods. Cognitive writing allows us to be *competency-based*, concretizing this somewhat nebulous term in a series of learning artifacts that will tell a story, and contextualizing the oftentimes narrow and dehumanizing story that test scores and letter grades do.

"Competency-based education is simple," says the Aurora Institute, an organization dedicated to promoting best practices, identifying policy barriers, and making recommendations for change in pursuits of competency-based education and personalized learning. In competency-based education, "learning is best measured by students demonstrating mastery of learning, rather than the number of hours spent in a classroom." They define competency-based education as a "system" in which:

- "students are empowered daily to make important decisions about their learning experiences, how they will create and apply knowledge, and how they will demonstrate their learning.
- assessment is a meaningful, positive, and empowering learning experience for students that yields timely, relevant, and actionable evidence.
- students receive timely, differentiated support based on their individual learning needs.
- students progress based on evidence of mastery, not seat time.
- students learn actively using different pathways and varied pacing.
- strategies to ensure equity for all students are embedded in the culture, structure, and pedagogy of schools and education systems.

- rigorous, common expectations for learning (knowledge, skills, and dispositions) are explicit, transparent, measurable, and transferable" (Levine & Patrick, 2019).

Cognitive writing in learning journals can define this system, creating both a space for building learner agency and documenting learning in such a way that allows us to be both compliant to the processes and products that govern our education system, meanwhile expanding our definition of success in classrooms.

By the end of our time together, I hope you'll see that cognitive writing is not only a means for growing writers; it can be both a visionary but still sustainable shift in your teaching that humanizes learning, helping students feel seen, heard, and validated for their valiant efforts to grow.

Chapter Summary and Reflection

Cognitive writing in learning journals supports writing fluency, offers teachers a sustainable teaching practice, and reinforces the importance of equity in our instruction. Cognitive writing also helps us to redefine what success looks like in our classrooms, shifting toward competency-based education. Journals become interactive notebooks, telling the story of a child's learning journey over the course of the year.

Using the following cognitive writing structure and sentence starters, reflect on the following questions. What problems might cognitive writing help you solve in your classroom? What barriers do you see to starting cognitive writing? Please write in complete sentences, rewriting the sentence frames, since this is what you will need your students to do.

Opportunities

- Cognitive writing can . . .
- I see an opportunity for cognitive writing to help with . . .

Barriers

- I anticipate . . .
- I am concerned that . . .

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