

Reflective Writing— A Knowledge Building Tool¹

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Writing involves a recursive knowledge building cycle of speaking—writing— thinking; focused communication and interaction with others; and a perspective on the world. When thoughtful writing activity is incorporated into various educational disciplines, it can become a powerful social tool that is both authentic and reflective.

In order to foster genuinely reflective writing, however, the teacher must set appropriate learning tasks, tasks that will allow students to understand through direct experience that writing is an extended process, inherently related to thinking, and expressive of each writer's own personality.

This article describes how reflective writing was incorporated into lessons for various grade levels in various subject areas: in Natural Sciences (3rd grade), Civic Education (4th grade), Geography (5th grade), and Physics (6th grade). The types of texts created include argumentative essays, five-minute essays, and student journals.

The Romanian National Curriculum endorses a *communicative-functional* approach to support the development of communication abilities. This model implies the integrated development of both receptive and expressive communicative competencies, so that students are able to interpret oral speech and written information, and to express themselves both orally and through writing. Consequently, attention is given to building students' ability to use written language appropriately across a wide variety of communicative situations.

According to the Romanian Curriculum, writing itself also represents a discrete subject to be studied. The main objectives of the writing course (Language and Communication) are to be achieved through a series of exercises, beginning with exposure to the symbols and associated sounds that make up the alphabet, moving forward to the construction of words and the appropriate use of punctuation, and eventually leading to the development of the skills required to create and edit one's own texts. Hence, writing is conceptualized as an intellectual activity, involving thinking and practice directed toward the acquisition of skills, which become more integral and automatic over time.

Writing is typically learned after the fundamentals of oral language have been mastered, and after the emergence of inner language (around the age of 4.5–5.5). Writing is clearly related to thinking in that it requires systematic application of 'rules' and conventions, and calls for clarity and conciseness (Popescu-Neveanu, 1976). At every stage, writing involves individual interpretation and decision-making, and thus almost always carries a strong imprint of the writer's personality.

Reflective writing

Writing can serve as an efficient tool for intellectual work and as a means of accessing knowledge. Developing competence in both oral and written language is an educational priority, because such competence is a key means by which students can fully understand the information conveyed in different subject areas.

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Educators should promote *reflective* writing and speaking in order to allow their students to formulate questions, express their own views of the world, comprehend concepts, and create logical categories, thereby engaging in an ongoing process of refining their understanding of the information studied. Reflective writing can involve encouraging students to write what they think they know about a given topic or subject, to write their questions/problems related to the topic, to read about and discuss those questions/problems, to revise and prioritize their ideas, to organize their questions/problems in tables and columns, to create graphic representations, to synthesize information and make associations among ideas, to review what they have learned, to reformulate, etc.

Of course, to encourage effective use of reflective writing by their students, teachers in all subject areas must formulate appropriate learning tasks. Through such activities, students learn that writing is not restricted only to Language and Communication classes, not something they need to be concerned about only during their Romanian Language and Literature class, but that it is a valuable tool for accessing and understanding the content of other subjects as well. Students also learn that writing represents an extended process, involving different steps and stages, re-emergences and re-writings; and that this process is intimately related to thinking, and so becomes an expression of one's own personality.

In guiding students through the writing process, the teacher moves through a recursive knowledge building cycle of speaking—writing—thinking, which involves the development of writing skills (through writing exercises), communication (through students' discussion), and thinking processes (through reflective writing).

It is very important for the teacher to recognize and value the role played by students' prior knowledge and experience, in language learning and in the construction of an understanding of the world. Writing activity plays the role of *cognitive operator* in the processing of information, and therefore should assist students to state definitions, to devise classifications and ratings, and to conduct analyses and synthesize information, to develop interpretations, to make connections, etc.

Because practicing this sort of writing allows the student to play an active part in the various communication situations of everyday life, reflective writing is sometimes also called *social* writing or *authentic* writing. Reading and writing in a wide range of genres—letters, compositions, literary prose or poetry, summaries, advertisements, instructions, recipes, etc.—presents an endless array of opportunities for practicing reflective writing, across all disciplines and subject areas. For example, math and science activities related to time measurement and time zones, calculating distances on a map, financial calculations, and currency exchange, can all be enriched through—and offer relevant practice in—reflective writing. Similarly, in geography, tasks such as locating points by latitude and longitude, or describing the geographic location of particular countries, can be designed to incorporate thoughtful use of writing. Other examples of tasks that can be enhanced by reflective writing include all kinds of historical studies—studies of major historical events, famous historical figures, or personal genealogical history.

The practice of reflective writing

Knowledge building involves the orientation of writing activity towards the production of the types of texts and genres commonly used in the different subjects and disciplinary areas. In my

study of instructional strategies related to critical thinking, I undertook a comprehensive research study with 3rd–6th grade students to investigate how they generated reflective writing in various contexts.

Argumentative essays

Argumentative essays are a type of reflective writing in which the author adopts a certain position and defends it by stating arguments. The assignments given to students in the 3rd and 5th grades to build their skills in writing argumentative essays are described below. Their aim is to engage students in an interactive process by means of the following steps:

1. A controversial topic is introduced (perhaps through the reading of a story), and students are invited to voice their views and opinions about it, with the caveat that, regardless of their personal engagement with the topic, the discussion must remain polite.
2. The Value Line strategy is explained. For instance, if the topic is, *Do you come to school to learn how to ask questions or to learn answers?* one student might state that she comes to school in order to learn how to ask questions, while another might respond that school means learning answers to life's problems. These two then station themselves at opposite ends of an imaginary Value Line, and the other students must line up between them, positioning themselves according to their relationship to the two opposing poles of the argument. Next, participants compare their views with those of their neighbors, to be sure they are in the right place in the line. After conferring for a couple of minutes, each cluster or individual is given the opportunity to express their particular point of view on the issue. (Other strategies such as the Discussion Web and the Academic Controversy can also be used to facilitate debate.)
3. Students are then given five minutes to write their individual positions on the topic. This first statement of their position, together with later illustrations and clarifications, will become the first paragraph of the argumentative essay. (Double spacing is recommended, to leave space for further annotations.)
4. Students group themselves in pairs and read their paragraphs to each other. Each listener must first restate the other's position, then tell the writer what evidence he would require to be convinced of this position.
5. Following this exercise, students are given 10 minutes to write down their arguments. (Again, these should be double-spaced to allow for later additions or changes.)
6. Students then read their entire essays to their partners. The partner again restates the author's position, this time including the arguments and the conclusion.
7. Taking into account their partner's response and suggestions, students take 10 minutes to revise their papers, to more effectively express their positions. Students are reminded to try to state their arguments concisely and make the conclusion worth remembering (Steele, Meredith, & Temple, 1997).

The examples selected for analysis and excerpted below are from students in a 3rd grade Science class and a 5th grade Geography class in Sibiu, Romania. The science teacher (G.M.) and the geography teacher (B.E.) had attended a course on the development of critical thinking in the RWCT program and afterwards were mentored for one year.

For the 3rd grade Science class, the controversial topic for the essay was: *Is man a superior being?*

After analyzing the essays, we noticed that the *pros* prevailed, with the majority of the students contending that humans are indeed superior beings. The students succeeded in generating a variety of logical arguments, many of them quite sophisticated; they also demonstrated a capacity to consider opposite points of view. We identified three types of arguments and categorized the essays accordingly:

- **Generally accepted arguments.** Man works; thinks; communicates; is endowed with feelings.
- **Special arguments.** Man studies nature and attempts to decipher its mysteries; uses these nature studies to make his life easier; establishes a family, raises and educates the children; invented all the technologies we use; engages in research and seeks to advance knowledge; creates things that have practical uses.
- **Profound arguments.** Man can influence and control other beings; distinguishes between good and evil; can affect the environment in a positive or negative way. Through the centuries, humans have modified their surroundings to meet their needs. Man is the most evolved mammal living on this planet.

In some students' essays we also encountered ideas that, without necessarily representing valid counterarguments, proved that they did indeed think about the opposing point of view, that they did not simply accept a given opinion. Thus, they give consideration to the notion that while humans in general might be judged to be superior beings, there are also exceptions. The following reasons were given:

☒ *Many humans do not think and do not work, so they cannot be considered superior beings.*

- *Not all humans are superior beings, because some of them do wrong things (they steal or kill), which makes them closer to animals.*

- *There are some human beings who are born with mental disorders, and because they cannot think, or understand others, they cannot be considered superior beings.*

These students' observations are pertinent and are rather impressive considering the level of intellectual development of 3rd graders. Two of their responses are quoted below, to provide a fuller picture of the nature of their arguments:

- *A being who appeared millions of years ago, man is the most evolved being on Earth. As opposed to all the other beings, human beings are endowed with thinking, and are able to distinguish between good and evil, which makes for a net superiority as opposed to all the other beings. Man thinks, communicates, works, is endowed with feelings, can be happy or sad. All these cannot be accomplished by other beings. Man can influence the environment, either in a positive or in a negative manner. (C. A., 3rd grade)*

- *Man is a superior being because he can talk and think. Humans can communicate, learn, read, write, invent. Man is a superior being because, as opposed to the other living beings, he can be distinguished through: the food he eats, the houses he builds, his behavior and his clothes. (S.M., 3rd grade)*

The teacher, G.M., noted in her journal that *the students work in pairs, read, listen to, help each other to improve their work, (...), include annotations and clarifications in the blank lines,*

express their opinions, mentioning what they liked and why. These outcomes can be considered effects of the promotion of reflective writing.

A challenging topic was assigned to the 5th grade students by B.E., the Geography teacher: *Can Romania enrich itself by means of tourism?* Here again, students were first invited to respond using the Value Line strategy.

To begin the lesson, students were asked to think independently about the given topic and attempt to shape their answers. Then, at the teacher's request, they placed themselves on the imaginary Value Line according to whether they agreed with the statement, disagreed, or were indecisive. Thus positioned, they discussed their positions with their classmates and offered their arguments for and against. In the course of their discussions, as they developed, defended, and reformulated their arguments, students changed their locations in line, whenever a classmate's argument persuaded them to do so.

The next step in the process was for the students to reconsider and edit their initial essays. Later analysis of these essays, using the criteria of the Toulmin argumentation model (Toulmin, 1958), demonstrated that:

- Students respected the central idea or *claim*— they did not deviate from the given topic, nor did they distort it.
- Students elaborated their points, offering examples and *data* about the tourist areas in Romania, the state of historical monuments, the services and facilities offered at the spas, access to these attractions, etc.
- Students outlined the *warrants*, noting for example that the tourist potential of the country depended upon its natural resources being appropriately valued and protected.
- Students provided the *backing* for their warrants to support their claims: For example, attention would be needed to preserve the cleanliness of the environment; "green" areas would need to be improved; monuments renovated, roads reconstructed, transportation and trade developed, etc.
- The use of *modal qualifiers* was limited: Very few students made reference to the potential role schools might play in making tourism a successful venture.
- The *rebuttals* expressed varying degrees of pessimism, ranging from *lots of money is being invested and it is difficult to recover this investment and the prices demanded by the Romanian tourism industry are inappropriate in view of the services offered*, to the strong assertion that *the money ought to be used in industry/agriculture/other areas that are more important and more useful than tourism, and more new jobs should be created*.

In the *Students' Reactions and Other Observations* column of her teacher's reflective journal, B.E. observed that the students were highly active, listing their opinions in their copy-books, reading them to their friends after class, showing support for their chosen argument and trying to persuade others of their position, formulating counterarguments. She also noted that students were serious and interested in the discussion.

Five-minute essays

For the 4th grade students, reflective writing took the form of five-minute essays. The teacher, S.F., wrote in her own journal for the Social Studies course that, through writing five-minute

essays, the students *manifest their subjectivity, exteriorize their feelings and gain confidence and courage*. After reading these short reflective pieces bearing the title “Friendship,” we noted that students approached the given topic from several perspectives, expanding outward from the central pragmatic dimension to philosophical/religious and aesthetic ones:

- *A friend in need is a friend indeed, and true friendship is never forgotten!*
- *Friendship—it’s difficult to fathom. Understanding all its mysteries is a hard thing to do. A friend must respect you and you must also respect your friend!*
- *Friendship is like one heart shared between two persons; therefore friendship means feeling with someone else’s heart!*
- *Friendship—it’s a good thing, because without it, harmony would not exist, harmony among humans, birds, animals and other beings inhabiting this Earth. God created friendship in order to bring peace to the world!*
- *What is friendship? Friendship is the root of kindness; it is a gift from God. Friendship is the nicest thing on Earth! Regardless of race or skin color, if someone is suffering, you must be his friend!*
- *If we have friends we are rich. Friendship is our joy forever. It is a gift. You are richer when you have someone to love, and someone who loves you!*

The teacher S.F. commented, *After thinking over these essays and evaluating them, I was able to treat students as individuals, to avoid pigeonholing them*. Stimulating the students to express their opinions and points of view, provoking them to take part in debates with philosophical connotations, right from the very early school years, fosters the development of students’ thinking, language, and their socialization as citizens in a democracy.

Students’ journals

For the 6th graders, we have selected a few impressions from a Physics course taught by R.A., expressed in form of a student’s journal. Filled in either at the end of each lesson or periodically, the students’ journals reveal a range of thoughts, feelings, observations, and assessments that teachers can value and apply to future lesson planning:

- *It was a little complicated, yet enjoyable, because thinking was involved.*
- *I liked it because I could measure, apply, explain and associate, and describe the results.*
- *I felt challenged and involved, and I understood how to calculate a body’s dimensions.*

The lessons that benefited from the students’ direct involvement, lessons that allowed them to interact with their classmates, with the teacher, and with the subject of study, often led to unexpected and positive surprises, to unanticipated satisfactions, and to the expression of new challenges.

Conclusions

In this study, students aged 8–9 and 12–13 were quite capable of handling the assigned communication tasks. Yet too often students are not given sufficient opportunities to explore and exploit their oral and writing abilities during class activities. Therefore, as teachers, we must work to ensure that they feel comfortable in collective situations; in group discussions; to use the words and the arguments needed to express themselves; to explain their point of view or to persuade someone; to express actions, wishes, or emotions.

Reflective writing in the early school years offers students a chance to better identify the purpose of schoolwork, the long-term goals that underlie the day-to-day learning tasks. This understanding is best achieved through complex learning tasks designed to raise students' interest and encourage reflection. By encouraging reflective writing, teachers can help students learn how to use oral and written expression as a means to their own acquisition, generation, and critical evaluation of knowledge.

References

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