

THE UNIVERSAL Writing CONTINUUM

Best Practices Recommended by Uni-SPIRE

Teachers build relationships with their students

- **Know your students' individual needs,** the context in which they learn best, what is important to them, and significant experiences they have had. You can begin by greeting each child at the door each morning with a friendly greeting. Talk to them individually about what is going on in their lives outside of school. Ask about their families. Purposefully determine 3 or 4 students each day that you will observe and keep anecdotal notes on to observe for patterns. Do certain students prefer art over writing; do they love reading but hate math? Spend a few minutes each day reflecting on the data you have collected on these 3 or 4 students and write some goals, questions you need to find out more about. In 2 weeks time, you will have gotten to know a lot about your entire class. Don Graves suggested an exercise that you may find enlightening. On a piece of paper, make three columns. In the first, from memory, write down the first and last names of all of your students. In the second column, write down something you know about each student, their family, or their strengths. In the third column, write about the students' interests, favorite books, favorite authors. Now study the list to see whom you want to spend some more time with tomorrow.
- **Build rapport and trust.** It is difficult to learn from someone that you don't trust. Think about the language you use when you talk to students and how you give feedback about their learning. You can set expectations, but responding with sarcasm or put-downs will send a message that you don't really expect them to learn. Be specific in your expectations and then scaffold for students who may struggle to meet those expectations by offering questions that might hint at the next steps for them to try to overcome a hurdle, model a process, or help them make some new connections. Tell students often that they can learn. Ask them, "How are you feeling?" "What do you need to go further?" "What do you need me to help you with?" Building trust and rapport doesn't mean lowering expectations. Students want to know that you believe in them. Celebrate the struggles they have and cheer them on. When they make strides, give them a high five, not candy or stickers. Alfie Kohn wrote an article on 5 good reasons not to say, "Good job." This doesn't mean not to give positive feedback, but try saying, "You should be very proud of yourself." "Look at what you now know or can do that you couldn't do before." Help the students own their successes.
- **Build a community of learners.** When students hear you give positive feedback, they are much more likely to emulate you. I was visiting a friend and her 4-year old granddaughter Lilly was playing school. Lilly had her high heels on, her purse and book bag on the desk and had lined her dolls up to read to them. She was using very encouraging and positive remarks to her dolls. Her grandmother said that she has a new teacher this year, but last year she was haughty and talked sharply to her dolls. Lilly learned these behaviors from modeling her

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previous teacher. Peer conferencing and literature circles are positive ways to begin to build community. Practice giving positive feedback and asking questions that will aid the writer or reader such as, “I’d like to know more about your main character. Can you add some more details about him?”

Teachers collaborating to discuss writing

- **Common language.** Having a common language to discuss curriculum is important. Professional learning communities (PLCs) with teachers reading a common professional book, bringing student work samples to discuss, or observing each other’s practice in the classroom aids teachers in developing a common language. We highly recommend that teachers meet in grade level PLCs and cross-grade-level PLCs to discuss students writing and how to evaluate it using the Universal Writing Continuum.
- **Common expectations.** One of the strengths of the Universal Writing Continuum, when used across the grade levels and schools, is the common expectations at a grade level and the developmental progression of skills across grade levels. Most curricula extend for the elementary, middle grades, secondary grades, early childhood or middle childhood. It is rare to find a program such as the UWC that extends from PK to 12 plus an advanced level for early college, dual credit, honors or AP. This gives teachers and students an opportunity to have a common language about writing throughout the grades.
- **Sharing of ideas.** Somewhere in the early 70’s, Language Arts had an article entitled “Teachers know more than text or test.”

Teachers and students co-evaluating writing

- Mini lessons assist teachers in conveying expectations for writing
- Conferencing
- Evaluating using the UWC together
- Self-evaluation
- Teachers and the human element can inspire writers

Promoting authentic purposes and audiences

- Writing as part of reading
- Writing as part of content units
- Making it “real”