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Why writing?

Reading, writing and arithmetic have been the bedrock of success at school since school was invented. Technology is remaking the world as we know it but literacy and numeracy skills remain critical in navigating the world.

Yet the focus of literacy is on reading, and writing tends to be the silent R of the Three Rs. Too seldom is writing seen as pivotal to a teacher's and a student's work.

Writing remains central to the work of a student. It is how students are assessed. It is how students demonstrate what they know and understand, whether in an History essay, a Science report, or a PowerPoint presentation. As students move from primary to secondary school, the demands on their writing increase as they grapple with the different demands across subjects from English and History, to Science, PDHPE, Economics or Geography.

It is time to shift the national conversation to a focus on the importance of writing, and what teachers can do to assist their students gain these fundamental skills.

Recent research has identified significant benefits of writing in learning. These include:

- training the brain to operate efficiently by increasing the neural activation of multiple areas of the brain
- corresponding advances in reading. A 2012 study of preschool students found that the students who practiced freeform handwriting (not tracing) activated the brain's reading pathways. Put simply, the better we write, the better we read. (This relationship also works in reverse: we know that the more students read, the better their writing skills become)
- stimulation of creativity. It is a slower process to write by hand than it is to type, allowing the writer to develop ideas. As students begin to learn to handwrite 'automatically', their brain is freed to process content
- cognitive improvements, including increased word recognition and memory retention, and
- increased focus and attention by 'writing it down' (serving as a mnemonic) to reinforce a memory or connection.

Writing is a critical feature of NESA's work across curriculum, assessment, teaching and school standards. As a part of the literacy continuum, writing is incorporated into NESA syllabus content as one of the seven general capabilities expected of students across learning areas. Writing is an integral measure of student progress that underpins the NESA syllabuses taught in NSW schools.

As literacy is an integral foundation for learning, all teachers are teachers of literacy. By extension, the teaching of writing to students is a core function for all teachers, as it is part of their professional responsibility to know, teach and assess writing in their learning area. But what does this mean in practice?

Teachers want to know:

- what fundamental skills their students need to express their knowledge in a KLA
- how to correctly identify issues students have with writing in a KLA, and
- the opportunities to improve or extend students in writing.

Teachers will be the first to agree that teaching writing in one learning area is different to teaching writing in another. The demands of students' writing skills change within and across primary and secondary school and between subjects.

Furthermore, syllabus content is not just *what* teachers teach, but *how*. The approaches used by a Secondary Science teacher to measure student progress via a science report about the solar system are different to those used by a Secondary History teacher in assessing students who prepare an informative essay about the role of Ramses II in Ancient Egypt. Primary teachers need a range of approaches to tailor their teaching and assessment of student writing across the curriculum.

The scale of the task to improve student writing is highlighted by the decline in national and international student writing results. NESA and teachers can work together to support students in developing their writing skills to meet the requirement of a minimum standard in literacy, including in writing, to receive the HSC from 2020. Every teacher will benefit from a school and state wide focus on writing.

To support teachers in becoming confident teachers of writing, NESA has partnered with the Learning Sciences Institute of Australia at the Australian Catholic University to gain teachers' insight into how they teach writing. The Australian Writing Survey is open to all primary and secondary teachers across all subjects and learning areas. Teachers are asked to reflect on their practice to identify what teachers know (and what they want to know) about writing.

The survey asks teachers about:

- writing instruction they received in initial teacher education
- their professional learning experiences
- preferred teaching strategies
- preferred approaches to teaching writing
- how they use digital technologies
- how they assess and report on student writing
- their knowledge of NAPLAN writing criteria

The survey questions will take approximately 30 minutes to complete, and responses will remain confidential. Completing the Australian Writing Survey will contribute one hour of NESA registered PD addressing Standard 6.2.2 from the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers towards maintaining Proficient Teacher Accreditation in NSW.

Survey results will be analysed to inform the development or commissioning of subject-specific professional learning. Any new approaches developed by NESA to help the teaching profession teach writing will be linked to NESA syllabuses, so they can be integrated into classrooms rather than adding to teachers' workloads.

The survey is the first piece of work NESA is conducting as part of a broader research project into the teaching of writing.

For more information about the survey, please visit www.educationstandards.nsw.edu.au and click on the story in our slider.

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