VARIATION OF WRITING INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES (DESPITE PRESSURES TO STANDARDIZE)

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STANDARDIZATION IN U.S. K-12 SCHOOLS

Movement to standardize instruction

- Derived from business practices such as “total quality management”
  - Improve quality by making production uniform and ensuring few or no defects
  - Have clear standards and specs and make sure all workers are meeting them at all times.
MANIFESTATION IN SCHOOLS

Many schools, especially those labeled for “Program Improvement” (PI) under NCLB, are adopting:

- Testing all students 3-4 times per year to track student progress

- Commercially-produced writing such as Holt textbooks, Power Paragraphs, the Jane Schaffer Method, Step Up to Writing, or others

- In some cases, weekly curriculum guides
WILL THESE BUSINESS METHODS WORK IN SCHOOLS?

Kids aren’t standardized! This means that schools deal with a highly variable “raw product.”

Schools aren’t structured like businesses are – schools are loosely-coupled systems.
### Tightly coupled vs. loosely coupled systems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tightly coupled (i.e. most businesses)</th>
<th>Loosely-coupled (i.e. school)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- there are rules</td>
<td>- varied interpretations of goals or rules</td>
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<td>- there is agreement on what those rules are</td>
<td>- low levels of supervision</td>
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<td>- there is appropriate technology to meet those expectations</td>
<td>- departments, sections, or people often operate independently of each other</td>
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<td>- there are ways to check compliance with the rules</td>
<td>(Weick 1976, 1982)</td>
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<td>- feedback structures help improve compliance</td>
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ADVANTAGES OF LOOSELY-COUPLED SYSTEMS

- Remain adaptable to changes within their environments
- Can sense and correct small deviations
- Contain problems so that they don’t “monkeywrench” the entire system
- Allow for innovation and improvisation
- Can be more nimble and can better adapt to changing conditions and demands

(Weick 1982)
METHODS THAT IMPROVE QUALITY IN A TIGHTLY COUPLED SYSTEM MAY NOT IMPROVE QUALITY IN A LOOSELY COUPLED SYSTEM

- Coupling may be more likely to occur through culture than via regulation.
  - Loosely coupled organizations may have more success with cultivating shared goals and practices (Weick 1982)
- Changes tend to be more incremental
- Change may happen more informally, via social diffusion in social networks (Rogers 1995, cited by Communication theory/diffusion of innovations)
Within a loosely coupled system, what influences teachers’ actual classroom practices when they teach writing?
STUDY METHODS

- 9 teachers at 5 middle schools
- 4 middle schools were in Program Improvement (PI) and 1 was not
- At all but one school, 1 teacher had participated in the National Writing Program (NWP) and one had not
  - The fifth school only had a teacher who had participated in the NWP
- 1-5 teaching observations and interviews with each teacher
- Qualitative analysis of observation and interview data using Nvivo 8
Teachers who had participated in the NWP

- Often used more materials – both district texts and additional texts that they had learned about through the NWP or found on their own
- Often employed a broader variety of techniques to teach writing
- Often created more opportunities for students to interact and learn actively
- Often exhibited a broader range of interactions (questions and answer types, comments) with their students
Teachers who had not participated in the NWP

- 2 only used district-provided texts

- 2 attempted to use techniques they had gotten from the NWP during their teacher training or at inservices and also sought out and used information they had acquired on their own
  - But they did not employ as many teaching techniques, or employ them as systematically, as the NWP teachers
4 “telling cases”
Ms. Goss – non-NWP teacher in a PI school

- Believed that the district-adopted Holt textbook provided complete information and materials for teachers
- Had participated in committees to create curriculum guides on the Holt textbook and had served as a district teacher-trainer to help new teachers learn to use the Holt program
Ms. Goss – Materials Used

Instructional materials:
- Holt textbook
- Holt curriculum guide
- Self-made Overhead providing information for taking notes
Ms. Goss – Instructional Techniques for Teaching Writing

![Graph showing coding by node](image-url)
Ms. Goss -- Student Interaction Opportunities

![Diagram](chart.png)
Ms. Goss – Teacher-student Interactions

Goss_obs11-30-07 - Coding by Node

Node

Number of coding references

0 1 2

Closed-ended T
Teacher answers own
Statement about home
Poll class
Open-ended T
Correcting
Procedural S
Non-response S
Condescending
Ms. Goss summary – non-NWP teacher in a PI school

- Used only materials from the district
- High frequency of procedural instructions (17), with only a few, brief, instances of modeling or specific assignment strategies
  - In fact, students spent most of the period taking notes on the correct procedure for writing a paper
- Student interaction opportunities were fairly brief and were fairly mechanical and structured (i.e. gluing paper, copying notes)
- Questions tended to be closed-ended and procedural
Ms. Ripley – non-NWP teacher in a non-PI school

- Ms. Ripley had done a “mini-[NWP]” through her teaching training program.
- She also collaborated with one or more NWP teachers during her school’s more open-ended Professional Learning Community time.
- Had made writing instruction an emphasis and had sought out training and materials on her own
  - Her school allowed or encouraged this
Ms. Ripley – Materials Used

- Holt textbook
- Power paragraphs
- Sample essays from Sheri Henderson
- Adapted worksheets from other teachers that they began sharing during their Professional Learning community (PLC) time
- Atwell’s *Writing territories*
- Fleming’s *Rain, steam, speed*
- Handouts compiled from a variety of unidentified sources
- Reading log (unclear whether it was from the teacher or an “outside” source)
- Persuasive research materials, including check-off list and two forms of outlines
- A variety of handouts that appear to be created by her
- Students brainstormed journal topics to be used in class
- Students created, “hosted,” and played grammar games
Ms. RIPLEY – INSTRUCTIONAL TECHNIQUES FOR TEACHING WRITING

![Bar chart showing the number of coding references for Assignment strategy, Procedural, and Clarification about.](chart.png)
Ms. Ripley – Student Interaction Opportunities
MS. RIPLEY – TEACHER-STUDENT INTERACTIONS
Ms. Ripley Summary – Non-NWP Teacher in a Non-PI School

- Cultivated a student-centered classroom
- Generally used relatively few instructional strategies or interaction types, but used them in a depth
- Students often worked independently or in pairs or groups, and she helped them through individual conferences
Ms. Webb – NWP teacher in a PI School

- Also had training in the AVID program
- Her school provided a weekly curriculum guide for Language Arts teachers to follow
- She felt that the guide was mismatched with her students’ needs and added/substituted what she felt were more genuine reading and writing opportunities as much as she could
- Described herself as a “good girl” who often felt conflicted about doing this
Ms. Webb — Materials Used

- Holt textbook
- *Chapter One* grammar instruction (but stopped using it)
- Accelerated reader program
- Novels from the school and classroom library or other sources
- Poems from other published texts
- Poems that she wrote
- “Reciprocal Teaching Review” that she created
- Poems from anthologies from students in previous classes
Ms. Webb -- Instructional Techniques for Teaching Writing
Ms. Webb – Student Interaction Opportunities
Ms. Webb – Teacher-Student Interactions

Webb_Obs. 11-9-07 - Coding by Node

- Closed-ended-S: 5
- Open-ended-S: 2
- Open-ended-T: 1
- Closed-ended-T: 1
- Follow-up question: 1
- Encouraging correct: 1
- Give consequence-T: 1
- Statement about home: 1
- Text clarification-T: 1
Scaffolded instruction and provided explicit instruction

Created numerous opportunities for students to interact as writers and as interpreters of literature

Created opportunities for students to share their work

Provided models of good writing from numerous sources, including professional authors, her own writing, and current and former students

Felt conflict between doing what the district asked her to do and doing what she felt was useful and just for her students
Ms. Velo – NWP Teacher in a Non-PI School

- Had moved from a PI school, partially to gain more instructional freedom
Ms. Velo – Materials Used

- Holt textbooks
- Edusoft tests
- Power Paragraphs
- Jane Schaffer Method (from previous junior high)
- Sheri Henderson (from previous junior high)
- “Print source” worksheets created with the school librarian
- Nancie Atwell
- Don’t forget to write – 826 Valencia
- Materials from a writing workshop
- Mechanically inclined – Jeff Anderson (had presented at SCWriP)
- Storyboarding as a form of pre-writing for narrative essays
- “Universal book report” – example of the type of generic book report students should not write – brought in by a student
Ms. Velo -- Instructional Techniques for Teaching Writing
Ms. Velo – Student Interaction Opportunities

![Diagram showing Velo_Obs. 2-1-08 - Coding by Node]

- Number of coding references
- Nodes: Share out to class, Work with a partner, Share favorite line, Read out loud to class

The diagram illustrates the coding by node for the observed interactions, with different shading levels representing the number of coding references for each node.
Ms. Velo – Teacher-Student Interactions
Ms. Velo summary – NWP teacher in a non-PI school

- Provided explicit instruction and scaffolding

- Provided opportunities for students to share their work

- Interactions were characterized by responses to students’ questions and comments, rather than solely on procedural instruction.
Implications for school reform –

What factors seemed to influence the teachers’ actual classroom practices?
PARTICIPATION IN PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITIES

- The groups teachers were active in, and the topics these groups discussed, seemed to strongly influence their classroom practices.
- Ms. Goss was active as a district trainer for implementing the Holt textbook and had the most fidelity to the textbook when she taught.
- NWP teachers often used materials they had been exposed to through the NWP.
- Teachers who weren’t active in a professional group (Ms. Ripley) tended to use fewer techniques and tended to develop their instruction on their own.
SOCIAL DIFFUSION

- Interpersonal networks often influence individuals’ decisions to adopt innovations (Rogers 1995, cited by Communication theory).
- Innovators tend to be “cosmopolites” with larger interpersonal networks.
  - They get exposed to more new ideas, which they bring to their local communities.
- The NWP helped teachers become cosmopolites by giving them access to a larger interpersonal network.
Rather than using standardized instruction, the NWP teachers used more varied instruction

- Participation in the NWP provided teachers with a broad set of innovations, rather than with a specific set of materials and reforms.
- They incorporated several common techniques, including freewrites or quickwrites, group or partner work, explicit instruction, and opportunities to share writing.
- But they were able to “mix and match” these techniques to fit their instructional goals and the needs of their students.
If students vary, and if schools face variable conditions, then it stands to reason that teachers who can use a variety of instructional materials and teaching techniques would be more likely to provide effective instruction.

Variation might be the more effective tool for meeting the NCLB goal of effectively educating ALL of our students.
Perhaps variation isn’t something to be feared or discouraged in schools. Perhaps schools, as loosely coupled systems, need to embrace variation.

Intelligent variation may be more effective than “quality control” and standardization.
Improving instruction by increasing intelligent variation would require:

- Professional networks that facilitate the diffusion of information.
- Training and logistical support to help teachers apply that information.

The National Writing Project (NWP) currently provides one of the strongest models, but there is still a need to improve social diffusion within schools.
WORKS CITED


