Interview with Steven Graham

Part of a Transcript from an interview with Dr. Steve Graham (Author of "Writing Next") Click the link to view the video and access the whole transcript

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Below is an edited transcript from our interview with Dr. Steve Graham, divided into the following sections:

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Improving Writing Instruction

One of the things that teachers can do to become better writing teachers is that they want to look to take course ... at least one or more courses in terms of how to teach writing. Another thing that I think is really important and a great resource in this country is a National Writing Project. In fact, in some ways, the National Writing Project is probably in terms of in-service preparation the largest organization that exists in the U.S. They started out in the Bay Area in San Francisco. And it was preparation that centered around teachers teaching each other and they've expanded nationwide.

And what I love about the National Writing Project teachers, they have a "can do" attitude. They believe that they can be successful. They work on preparation. They're constantly expanding the scope of what they can do. So if I had to say one thing right now, it's get involved with the National Writing Project. I think, you know, the other kinds of things are pretty obvious. There are a lot of good books out there that take the research that we have and there's increasingly large amount of research on how to teach writing effectively and they translate that into practice.
And obviously, if you're serious about this, the more knowledge you gain, the more you try things out, the more you talk and interact with others who are of the same feather or ilk that you are, the more likely you'll become better at doing this.

I think it's also important to be a writer yourself. It's a lot more convincing to kids if you share what you write if you're asking them to write as well.

**Peer Revising**

One of the strategies that we developed and used and we've done this with Charles McArthur — I want to be sure to mention his name — is a peer revising strategy. And basically, what it does is it provides a structure for kids to get feedback to each other on their writing. So I'm going to share a little story with you about its development. When we first tried this out, we came through with the idea if we could get kids to say something about each other's writing, it might be useful, both in terms of their own writing and the other students' writing.

We sat down with two fifth-grade kids. We had each of the kids write a story. And then I said to one of the kids, I'd like for you to read your story to the other kids. And when he was done reading the story, I asked the other young lady to give him some feedback on it that might be useful. The first thing out of her mouth was "it stinks". And so as a result, the poor kid who wrote the story went storming out of the classroom and I went home for the evening. And so we went back the next day and I asked the young lady if she would share her story with the young man.

And beforehand, I got together with him and I said … I know it was tough yesterday. So it was my fault that we approached it the wrong way. I said I want you to tell her three things that you like about the story. And then I'm going to ask you to take it away and I want you to look for two things. I want you to look very closely where there could be additional information that would help you understand the story. Because this young lady was very sparse in what she said. And I want you to also look for anyplace where there's some confusion.

Because there were a lot of confusions in what she wrote. And so if there's confusion, put a question mark. If there was more detail, you put a caret. And then he'd come back and say, you know, can you tell me more about what you meant there? I didn't quite understand this. And it worked great. And so we used that as the basic structure for this kid's advising strategy. Each kid writes. They share their composition with the other kids. The rule is you always say something positive about your partner's composition.

And then you look at that composition with certain things in mind. And what I like about it is it's structural-you can gear upward or downward the number of criteria that you take a look at. And so you could have two criteria and one criterion. You could go up to four. A criterion could drop out once you've gotten that one kind of satisfied. And what we found with the kids is that it not only improved the peer adviser, but we started seeing things that we were looking for pop up in the first drafts of each of the kids.
So they started internalizing those criteria as their own. So that's a strategy that can be used all the way from first grade up to twelfth grade. So it's very flexible. Use one strategy only, but with changing criteria for teaching it.

**Grammar Instruction**

The question about whether or not teachers teach grammar has bedeviled writing instructors for the last 100 years. We probably know as much about this particular aspect of writing as we know about anything else. If you were to ask me the traditional approach to teaching grammar, should we do it, the answer's no. So what does that traditional approach look like? Typically, it involves going from definition to example. So we define what an adjective is. And then we ask kids to generate examples. Then what happens is we have them practice that skill in de-contextualized situations, filling in the blank, picking the correct answer. And there's never any transfer over to your writing.

So when you compare that approach to almost any other approach, the other approach is more effective. Now, I think there's two ways that we can deal with this. We don't want to ignore grammar all together. One of the ways to teach grammar is to use a procedure like sentence-combining. We have considerable evidence that when you teach kids to take small kernel sentences, model how to combine those into more complex sentences, work with them to help them do that until they get a handle on the skill, and then have them do it with others and then do it in their own writing, that has a positive both on the quality of their writing and the complexity syntactically of what they write. So it improves grammar. Not only grammar, but quality.

The other approach, and this is a little bit more risky because we don't have a lot of research on this, is to turn grammar instruction, that traditional instruction, on its head. So think about what I said before definition to example. Instead, we do from example and use that to establish the definition. So we might start off by getting all the describing words that we can for a dog that we have or something in the classroom. And we write all of those on the board. And when we have kids generate other describing words. And we say, you know what?, another word for describing words is adjective.

So we know that kids know what the describing words are first. Then we use those to define it.

So I want to give an example of another way that we can approach teaching grammar other than sentence combining is in a sense turning traditional grammar instruction on its head. Then when I said that the way traditional grammar instruction operates is that we go from definition to example to de-contextualized practice. So we can swap or switch that over by starting with having kids generate examples to generate or develop a definition. So, for example, if I want to work on adjectives which basically are describing words, they describe persons, places and things.

So what I might do is to help me generate as many describing words about a person, place or a thing. And that's pretty easy for kids to do. Then we'll move from that once we're certain that they are able to generate those to getting a definition. But that's only a small percentage of what
we need to do, because that requires no application. So what I then might do as a teacher is give a small kernel sentence: mailman, dog, bite.

And what I might say is, you know, we really don't know a lot about this dog. And we know nothing about the mailman. So let's generate some describing words together that will describe this dog. And so then what I might do is say, okay. We've got all these words. I'm going to rewrite this sentence. The vicious huge dog bit the cowering running mailman. And so what we do is we give more description to that. And then we do more of those kinds of things together. Then kids do those together. And then they go back to their writing. And they look for places where they can add more description to it. And we encourage that.

So we've gone from example to definition. We've shown how to apply. We've given assistance in applied. And then we ask kids to use it in text. So that I think is much more effective in the traditional approach. Although, I've got to be straight forward. We don't have a lot of evidence on that yet. It's a small corpus of work that supports it. But I hope that grows over time.

Sentence-Combining

A question I sometimes get asked is what about sentence combining? I have a very famous colleague, Lynn Pughes, that tells me that she learned to write through sentence combining and other traditional grammar approaches. And I have no doubt that that worked for her. It's important to realize that there is considerable variation in what is effective for other people. She's a very analytical person. So I can see that working very well for her.

But what we see when we look at kids in general using things like sentence diagram is that they often can learn how to diagram a sentence, but it doesn't carry over to their writing. So they have this kind of skill that operates in outer space. But if it doesn't make it to your writing, it's not an effective procedure. Another question that sometimes comes up is what about punctuation and capitalization? Well, one of the places that we can take care of that is we can take care of that when we teach sentence combining.

Because it requires that you model how to use punctuation correctly. And so you're working on combining two sentences together into a compound one, you're going to write that on the board with the comma there. And kids are going to help you do it. It puts that instruction within context. That's not to say that it's not sometimes effective to take it out of context. And that maybe even more the case for kids who struggle with writing. But we always want to model. We always want to give scaffolded assistance. And we want to make sure the kids apply it back in the text.
One of the things that I'm asked about frequently in the last three to five years is writing and whether there is a demise in handwriting. And this takes various forms: whether or not we should teach cursive writing; whether we should teach handwriting at all. I've probably done close to 100 interviews with reporters over that time. And ninety of them have asked almost exclusively about handwriting. And I always say to them that's the tail of the dog. I'm glad to answer questions about the tail of the dog. But the tail shouldn't wag the whole dog.

Handwriting's important. But we also need to focus in on the full dog. Two out of every three kids in this country, according to the national assessment of educational progress, don't write well enough to keep up with grade level demands. So we need to have a much more complex picture of what we're focusing in on. But I don't want to ignore the school about handwriting. It is important in the sense that we need to become fluent and automatic with either manuscript, cursive, some combination of it, at college or typing.

So you don't really have to think about it. You can do it without conscious thought. Or if you run into something, it's going to take very little of your effort on it. I don't really care if it's manuscript cursive. You're mixing those two things together, italics or typing. But if you're going to develop as a writer, you need to get to the point where you're fluent with this particular skill. Otherwise, it takes up resources that can be used with planning, monitoring and evaluating, revising. Or it may even interfere with other writing processes like content generation.

Impact of Text Messaging on Writing

There's been a lot of question about whether or not text messaging and other kinds of advances that kids use in terms of electronics today, whether or not they have a negative impact in terms of kids writing. You see a lot of press on this. And you see a lot of bemoaning by people that, oh, the writing skills of adolescents are deteriorating because they're text messaging each other. We really don't know. My guess is, is that kids often become pretty proficient in switching codes. So they are pretty good in terms of writing informally.

When they write to kids in terms of email, other kids in terms of email and they can switch codes and write in a formal way. So I'm not sure that it's as big a problem as we're concerned about. I also think that we can take this and turn it on its head. And one way of doing that is to use text messaging or other ways in which kids create this more informal text and use that as a starting point for creating more formal text. So bring it into the service of more formal writing.

The other thing I think is important to realize is that this is the wave of the future. Writing is a way of communicating. This is another way of communicating through writing. And so we want to be sure that we embrace it, because kids have already done that.

Impact of Word Processors on Writing
Word processing can have an incredible impact as a tool for writing. It does at least three things for you. They're phenomenal. If you had to write by hand, revising text is really problematic. Because either you've got to scratch something out and write it in or get approval and come back and rewrite the whole thing. On the word processor, you can move stuff, you can delete stuff, you can write over. It makes revising so much easier. Second, if you become fluent on the keyboard, you can go a lot faster than you can with handwriting, and that can be a great thing in terms of productivity. Third, many kids find working on the computer to be much more motivating. And I have to tell you that often disappears after a year or two. But you take motivation where you can get it.

The other thing is that computers bring other software along with them or can bring them along with them that can help a struggling writer, something like inspiration where you can use that as a planning tool. Spell-checkers. Now, often we think of spellcheckers as betting rid of all the spelling errors.

The kids with learning disabilities in middle school, it probably helps you with about a third of them. But that's better than about the ten percent that kids get on their own. So it brings these other things that it bundles in with it that also are advantageous for writers. And those kinds of things are going to increase in their effectiveness over time as we get better with this. And the new wave in the future is going to be speech synthesis. It works with some kids with learning disabilities, now as they're in high school, who are very motivated to write in a way where that can correct the miscues that occur as a result of the oral input. But you can bank they're going to get better and better over time. They'll create their own problems, but they'll give kids a way of circumventing the transcription skill of handwriting and spelling.

One option for kids who have handwriting difficulties is to take word processing in the classroom. And a nifty little tool for doing this is alpha smart or what is now called Neo. Because it's cheap, around $100 for a regular Neo. And kids can take it into the classroom. You can throw it up against the wall. I'm not advising that you do that. But it's not fragile either. And so kids can carry it around with them, and for kids who can use keyboards quickly, it's a great tool. And it's an inexpensive one.