Reading Response to *Get it Done!* by Wilhelm, Smith, and Fredricksen

I was able to sit down with Jeff Wilhelm the other day and ask him about some of the most pressing concerns in education. He filled me in with some very important information concerning how to teach the new Common Core State Standards using informational text. (His responses include the page number one can read further about these topics.)

Rayme: Jeff, Why is it such a challenge to achieve a foundational knowledge of the purpose of various text structures?

Jeff: Page 14: Here’s one reason why: as teachers we’ve come to understand that there are conventional categories for texts that have lost their original power and meaning because we’ve lost the connection to why that category evolved in the first place and why and how it is used in the world. This phenomenon seems to us to be especially true for the category of informative/explanatory texts.

Rayme: What does comparison and contrast writing do for a learner?

Jeff: Page 17: Comparisons and contrasts also help you to see similarities despite differences, and differences despite similarities, which can do work towards achieving mutual understanding, allowing people with differences to work towards commonalities, or to make finely sliced differentiations

Rayme: What is the importance of teaching thought patters?

Jeff: Page 19: The importance of teaching thought patterns. We hope that our discussion here makes clear why we are so drawn to Bruner and his discussion of paradigmatic thought. He makes it clear that the kinds of informational/explanatory texts are ways of thinking. Our worry is that these text structures are often interpreted by teachers as forms for students to merely fill in, instead of as patterns of thought. Such an interpretation and the practices they engender does a disservice to our students because they ignore both the issues of rhetorical stance and the framing writers must do to orient readers, as well as the complexity and embeddedness of the structures in actual practice. In other words, the form becomes more important than the purpose of the text and its actual contextualized use, particularly in hybridized forms.

Rayme: Can’t I just teach my students the stuff they need to know for the test through lecture?

Jeff: Page 22: But, as Dewey’s student Ralph Tyler showed in the 40s, if students learn this same content through inquiry – if they learn the procedures for creating knowledge (the how)– then the knowledge that is created (the what) becomes generative, conceptual, and is retained over time. Tyler found that students learning in inquiry environments retained the seminal concepts and processes for the two years that he checked in on them.

Rayme: Wasn’t there a time in your teaching when you would just teach the declarative side of the inquiry square? Like when you taught the form of a sonnet?

Jeff: Page 25: [I] realized that through this kind of teaching [my] students developed no usable procedural knowledge. At the end of instruction, they did not have the capacity to generate their own interpretations or to write their own sonnets, nor to appreciate

the difficulty of writing a sonnet, nor to understand or appreciate why anyone would ever read or write one. (CCSS Anchor Standard for Writing #4) [My] students missed out on all the fun and all the power and all that was memorable or transferable because [I] taught on the declarative side instead of focusing on the procedural and getting to the declarative side through the procedural! It was a revelation!

Rayme: Do you have a lesson plan I could see?

Jeff: Look at page 30.

Rayme: Oh, thanks. So why would teachers want to use the inquiry square?

Jeff: Page 33: The five kinds of knowledge make their teaching more toolish than schoolish.

Rayme: Do you and Jim and Michael all use the inquiry square the same exact way?

Jeff: Page 34: Although we have all profited from using the five kinds of knowledge as a thinking tool, we also find that we use them somewhat differently. But we think that that’s a good thing. It shows that the heuristic of the five kinds of knowledge is flexible, as heuristics should be, and can be applied differently by different teachers with different students in unique situations without losing its generative power. Not an algorithm. Not lock-step. The word “heuristic” comes from the Greek root word “Eureka!” which means “I discover!”

Rayme: What’s wrong with the information-transmission method of instruction?

Jeff: Page 35: Oh, you mean with the teacher standing at the front of the class instructing the students and monitoring their seatwork. This kind of information-transmission will not help students to meet the CCSS and, has long been shown, will not lead to deep understanding, application, or transfer.

Rayme: How much research shows that students need a purpose in what they are learning?

Jeff: Page 36: Piles of research from cognitive science show that without a sense of purpose, you cannot learn.

Rayme: I just teach my students to write by making them write. What’s this composing you speak of?

Jeff: Page 38: Hmm… the difference between composing and writing- Well, kids don’t learn to write solely by writing... they can learn to write by doing many things that are not writing, e.g. hands-on activities, visualizing, debates, group problem-solving activities, small group discussions and much more, all of which involve talking about content *and* process and all of which involve talking about content *and* process through composing of one sort or another.

Rayme: So composing is more than writing?

Jeff: Page 38: Composing, in the 21st century, is about much more than traditional notions of writing.

Rayme: Oh, so composing to plan is brainstorming.

Jeff: Page 39: Composing to plan is not just brainstorming. Narrowing composing to plan to brainstorming implies that kids already know what they need to know and this just has to be activated. We have found this assumption to be decidedly not the case.

Rayme: Why not?

Jeff: Page 39- One has to know how to get something to write about. Why, for instance, and in what situations, is a writer driven to compose a sonnet or fable or comparison/contrast? How does a writer then get the material to compose one? This knowing how to get the stuff is what Hillocks defines as “inquiry” and we think it is the most important thing we can teach if we want our students to be life-long learners and problem-solvers.

Rayme: Why is Composing to Practice so important?

Jeff: Page 39: Those who are smartest happened to get the right kinds of practice and assistance in the right kinds of purposeful contexts. In contrast, traditional instruction in both reading and composing seems to be about assigning and evaluating instead of instruction and creating supportive environments for practicing, taking risks, and gradually developing expertise *over time.*

Rayme: Is getting started writing really all that hard for students?

Jeff: Page 40: Pascal said: “Getting started with writing is easy: open a vain and let your lifeblood flow onto the page.”

Rayme: Should I just bring up composing to transfer at the very end of the unit?

Jeff: Page 42: It’s important to emphasize that we use composing to transfer throughout the instructional process from the very start, particularly by using formative assessments. But we always end a unit and follow up on culminating projects by having students reflect on their learning and analyze the process of that learning.

Rayme: How do I know what piece of writing to assign in a unit?

Jeff: Page 45: Given your unit, what thought pattern/text structure will be most important? (CCSS Writing Anchor Standard #4) What thought pattern will be both required and rewarded in the context of learning? How and in what situations will this thought pattern/text structure be useful and do work conceptually and procedurally in terms of the inquiry, as well as in terms of students’ personal lived experience? Process: How will you engage the students in the process of Planning, Practicing, Drafting, Presenting, and Reflecting for Transfer, (CCSS Writing Anchor Standard #5) and how will you provide the necessary opportunities for students to reach “conscious competence” for using the thought pattern both now and in the future?

Rayme: Wow, that sounds like a lot of work. Is that all?

Jeff: No. There’s more.

• Deliverable: How will the culminating project/s use or integrate this thought pattern/text structure? (CCSS Writing Anchor Standards #2 and #4)

• Future: What purposes will the conceptual and procedural learning students achieve in this unit fulfill in future disciplinary and personal work; how will this learning help them to recognize the contexts for future use of the thought pattern? How has the groundwork been laid for transfer and improvement in developing even greater expertise with the thought pattern? How will you help students name and reflect on what they have learned in ways that will foster transfer? (This is precisely what the new assessments from PARCC and Smarter Balanced will call for—transfer of reading and writing skills to new situations.)

Rayme: Ok, I’m afraid to ask, but how do I go about planning for a culminating composing task?

Jeff: An important instructional move is to work with students to create a description of the culminating composition as well as criteria for it. Wiggins and McTighe (2005) describe the process for describing a culminating composition as including the following, which we call by the acronym GRASPS:

• Goal/s: What we want to understand and be able to do? Why? How do these match the CCSS?

• Role: What role/s will students to play? (e.g., themselves, a character, a particular profession/mantle of the expert, etc.)

• Audience: Who is the primary audience for what will be composed? How will the project/composition be shared?

• Situation: What is the context/the circumstances for the piece (e.g., Who will read it besides the primary audience?) and what are the circumstances for the writer (e.g., How much time do they have to write it? What resources can they rely

on? How long does it need to be?) What are the circumstances for the audience? (When and where will they experience the piece? What is their possible context of use for what they learn?)

• Purpose: What work will this piece of writing do for the writer and for the audience?

• Critical Standards for success: What does a strong example of this project look like? What critical standards will be met? Tie these to CCSS. (CCSS Writing Standard 4 and 10)

Rayme: Once the project is finished, what kind of reflection questions can I ask my students so that they can transfer their new knowledge in later units and in their life?

Jeff: Page 49: I’m glad you asked. Composing to Transfer reflection prompts: What did you learn? that you expected? that you did not expect? Conceptually? Procedurally? Socially? How did you learn it? What worked? What did not help or interfered with learning? What were some successes of your learning? How do you know? What were some obstacles and how did you experience and overcome them? When do you anticipate using what you have learned? What will you do differently the next time you engage in such a task?

Rayme: Do you do all these different things in the same unit?

Jeff: Page 50: Many of the schools we’ve taught in divide genres into separate units, divorce reading from composing, and grammar from writing.

Rayme: That’s funny- one semester I teaching language lab, then the next I teach reading lab.

Jeff: Whenever we learn anything, solve any problem, whenever we engage in inquiry, then we are going to use all of the literature, texts, materials and processes that obtain to that inquiry. So we will read a variety of literary texts including poetry, explanatory/ informative texts, argument texts, multimodal texts and popular culture texts that help us think through the content of the unit. (This is why we situated fable reading and writing in the context of a wider inquiry into relationships.)

Rayme: Do you have any specific examples of this?

Jeff: As an example, when a unit is framed with the question: “What is a good relationship?” this implies that students will practice defining and that their culminating projects will involve composing extended definitions. The question also suggests that we should read love songs, love fables, love poetry, Romeo and Juliet, informational articles on relationships like those found in Psychology Today, as well as extended definitions of various kinds like those of good relationships on the Planned Parenthood website, etc.

Rayme: Do you still do genre units?

Jeff: We no longer do genre units, but cover various genres that help us do our inquiry. Likewise, we study grammatical conventions that help to write the kinds of text structures we are composing, in the context of that composing. Things that go together are best taught and learned together. Likewise, when a unit is framed with the question “What makes the greatest leader?” it is implied that students will be comparing and contrasting. For “What are our civil rights and how can we best protect them?” a problem-solution structure is suggested. We save a lot of time by doing things together that go together, that co-produce and reinforce each other.

Rayme: (Question from FAQ Pg 51) “How do you deal with issues of grading? I mean, you recommend spending so much time practicing. What do you enter in your grade book? Parents expect to see daily grades!”

Jeff: Page 51-52:

OK, here is what we do. You’ll have to see if it works for you or if you can adapt it. We provide kids with a P-P-D every day: a purpose for the day’s lesson that is connected to the inquiry and leads towards and prepares them for the culminating project, the process that we will undertake during the activity, and a deliverable. During every lesson activity, we want students to produce something tangible that demonstrates effort and their current level of understanding. Sometimes this deliverable is produced in groups, but if so, then everyone has to identify their contribution. As we go through a unit, more and more work is individual, though students always have access to peers. These deliverables always provide a kind of quickly accessible formative assessment that makes student learning visible and informs our teacherly thinking about what kind of practice and support is needed next. Through the first seven weeks of a unit, the kids are planning and practicing. If they put in an honest effort and produce the deliverable, we give them 10 daily points that are entered on our electronic grade sheets, accessible to parents. These points could be called effort points. They are not based in any way on expertise or even growth.

Rayme: Why?

Jeff: Here’s why: first, we think there is an ethical problem with evaluating what you have not yet taught. We don’t think it is fair to apply critical standards until we have helped students, over time, to meet those standards. We tell our students that we will spend 7-8 weeks being their coach, then 1-2 weeks being the referee; 7-8 weeks being their advocate, then 1-2 weeks being their judge. We don’t think it’s fair to play the judge unless you have been the assistant and advocate first. Otherwise you are holding students accountable for something you have not yet taught them.

Rayme: Is that all?

Jeff: Here’s another reason: we like the metaphor of coaching for teaching. All three of us have been coaches of various athletic teams and other extracurricular activities in the arts or student government. It’s clear in coaching that you don’t start off day one with a high stakes test like a competition. You spend the first practice learning players’ strengths and weaknesses, then planning how to exploit strengths and address weaknesses through weeks of . . . you guessed it: practice! Then you do a controlled scrimmage, then a game-conditions scrimmage – moving your players ever closer to the high-stakes performance test of an actual game or meet. And you will do whatever is necessary to help them to be successful – win or lose – when they are in game situations.

Another reason: In motivational attribution theory (see, e.g. Dweck, 2006) students are more likely to develop a “growth” mindset and willingness to work through problems over time if they attribute success to effort. The more they attribute success to talent or aptitude, the less motivated they will be and the less willing to spend time practicing and working through the challenges necessary to growth and learning. By providing grades for effort until students have had the support to be successful is highly motivating and cultivates the growth mindset. In our own studies of boys (Smith and Wilhelm, 2002; 2006) we found that boys privileged competence above all else. They were willing to undertake very complex challenges like those required by the CCSS and the required assessments IF they felt the teacher would provide the necessary assistance and support, reward effort, and provide/celebrate visible signs of their developing competence along the way. (MARGIN: CCSS ASSESSMENTS)

There’s a final concern about the payoffs to our time and energy. We all have limited time and energy, so we have to decide how to best spend these valuable commodities. Our mentor George Hillocks’ research has convinced us that we get way more payoff in terms of student learning when we spend time on planning versus evaluation. He has also shown that we need to evaluate in ways and at times where that feedback can be immediately used – in revision and for transfer. So we prefer to give effort grades throughout by using formative assessments. We do summative assessments only at the ends of units on culminating projects and according to published and negotiated critical standards. And we always allow students to revise using our feedback.

We think it makes sense to hold students accountable, but only after we have helped them to master what we are assessing. We tell our students that if they put in the effort and practice, we are confident that they will develop the capacities to successfully complete the culminating projects. If students screw up and miss their points for a day, we often have them write a proposal or appeal letter (more writing!) and then allow them to make up the work. We want them to do the work, after all, and we want them to get the requisite practice, so we put the responsibility on them. We tell them we will help them in any way that we can. We have some extra time to do this because we are not grading stacks of papers. We can quickly peruse through formative assessments between classes and during lunch. We are pretty full-on during the day, but take less work and grading home.

Rayme: Will kids be writing more or less?

Jeff: Remember, even though there is only one major composition assignment per quarter, our kids are writing more than they ever wrote before – and all this writing helps them develop and placehold the content for their culminating compositions, and assists them to practice shaping that content into a conventional thought pattern/text structure as required by the disciplines. When it comes time to sit down and draft, they are practically done: they have all the stuff, and plenty of practice shaping the stuff. It’s time to sit down and write. Our assignment completion on our major writing assignments, even with struggling students, is almost always 100%, or very nearly so. That was far from the case when we gave more assignments and provided less assistance to our students.

Rayme: What is the benefit of naming and listing?

Jeff: Page 56: There are myriad purposes fulfilled by naming and by listing: in fact, we think that naming and listing require a kind of thinking necessary for all other informational/explanatory texts. Cognitive science agrees: Listing is a first step of knowledge activation and generation, moves us towards problem-solving performances, and it always involves naming (Damasio, 2010).

Rayme: Will students need to name processes in the CCSS?

Jeff: Page 57: Likewise, the CCSS uses similar language to name the processes important to meeting both the reading and writing standards. This is a smart move in that teachers will be able to name and share what they are teaching and students will be able to name what they are learning in the same terms. For instance, across grade levels and situations, the CCSS uses claim, evidence and reasoning to talk about argument; and task, purpose and audience to discuss issues of rhetorical stance. This consistent naming should give power and focus to our instruction and assessment and help provide conscious competence to students. Also, it’s important to note for our purposes here that there is the naming of specific strategies necessary for effective writing both generally, and when applied to specific text structures.

Rayme: Do you all use the correct terms for these processes?

Jeff: Page 58: Sometimes we rename ideas for our students to make these ideas more accessible. Though we would generally argue for using the term of art from the disciplines as the names for things (to meet the correspondence concept most closely), sometimes these terms are difficult for our students and stand in the way of understanding. For example, Michael and Jeff (2007) suggest creating more readily accessible names for some grammatical terms. When [I] realized that his students did not understand what an adverbial conjunction was and how it worked, [I] began calling it a “logical linker” which was more helpful to them. Michael and his ninth-grade students made lists of ”promise words,” subordinating conjunctions and relative pronouns, that promised a “two-part” (instead of a complex) sentence. On some occasions, [I] ha[ve] coined neologisms to teach, such as “two-fer” or “three-fer” to describe details that convey multiple kinds of information. Michael and his preservice teacher education students call themselves “Englishers” as a way to remind themselves that the 7-12 students with whom they are working might have a different attitude toward their subject. Likewise, when Jim is working with student teachers, who are often worried about classroom management, they use the term “magnet students” to name the one or two students in each class who the other students are attracted to. It’s the “magnet students” who student teachers can work with to foster the magnet students’ leadership and agency for the health of the classroom community.

Rayme: I like how you continue to go with the grocery list theme and show that you do some of the grocery shopping- defying gender roles, even for a big professor/writer. It’s a subtle social change statement.

Jeff: Page 61: Thanks. Sometimes, in my house, the grocery list will have an item like “green clover looking thing for guacamole”. It might take some discussion to figure out that what is meant is “cilantro”. The description, though amusing, is not going to be helpful to the grocery shopper. What we need here is a “name” that matches the name used by the grocery store.

Rayme: Should I just make my students write lists of topics I give them?

Jeff: Uhm, no. They should think about why they’re going to make a list and how it would be helpful.

Rayme: Are there any songs about lists?

Jeff: Page 71: *My Favorite Things* from *Sound of Music.*

Rayme: Do you have any ideas to practice writing summaries?

Jeff: Page 81: One-minute life summary! Then the same can be done for a historical figure.

Rayme: I need clarification of what an anchor chart is.

Jeff: Sorry, our time is almost up.

Rayme: Oookaay. Well, when should I focus on my students’ mechanics?

Jeff: Page 88: Don’t worry about mechanics as much til drafting. And here is a good place for proofreading.

Rayme: Did Obama really say that about you?!

Jeff: Page 89: Yes, yes he did.

Rayme: Do you have any other ideas for unit questions based on writing descriptions?

Jeff: Page 93: Here are some other units where we have extensively used reading and writing of descriptions: What is a hero? What is right action? What is courage? Such units not only obviously foreground definition but require it. Likewise “Who was the most influential American? our greatest leader? the best movie of all time? the most innovative musical group, the most powerful chemical, etc. all foreground comparison/contrast but also require description.

Rayme: But my students still don’t get how to help each other with their descriptive writing. How can I help them be better peer editors in this department?

Jeff: Page 93: One way to do so is to provide students with three to five pieces of students’ descriptive writing, ranging in quality. If you collect and keep student work, use some of these. If you do not collect student work, you can always get examples on-line or compose various examples of your own. We like to use three to five quite good examples that differ in various ways, so that students will see various models of success. In other words, the texts we choose might vary in quality but not so obviously that ranking them would be easy.

Rayme: Then what do I do?

Jeff: Provide the examples to small groups of students. Ask them to rank the quality of the examples from best to worst, first by working on their own, and then in a small learning group. Their job is not just to rank the samples, but even more importantly, to know why they ranked them in this way. What, specifically, makes the best one the best? Why is the second best pretty good, but not quite so good as the best one? As students do this, they will be articulating and describing critical standards that can be put on a class anchor chart that can guide their own descriptive writing. As a further step, the whole class can examine the piece that most think is the best, and the piece most think is the worst, articulating critical standards for descriptive writing as they do so. (We personally think that articulating and using critical standards is an essential and oft neglected area of learning.)

Rayme: Do you have any mentored texts you recommend to help teach description?

Jeff: Mentor texts for description we’ve liked are *Dr. Dog* by Babette Cole, and *Let's Do Nothing* by Tony Fucile.

Rayme: How can we get kids to *see* things?

Jeff: Page 94: The poet John Ciardi maintained that whatever is looked at carefully becomes worthy of being looked at carefully. So the question is: how can we help kids to REALLY see things? How can we help them to take off the blinders and typical way of seeing, and notice what we typically do not? One activity we like is a game where we ask students to journal about five things they think that no one else will notice in this classroom. We ask them to identify these objects or senses or experiences and then to describe them briefly.

We then compare what we have come up with, sometimes with applause and appreciation or even a prize for each item no one else has recorded, or for descriptions that adhere to our class criteria. (Page 95): Mystery pots can work well to help students infer organization and structural devices.

Rayme: What’s a mystery pot?

Jeff: Page 95: In a mystery pot, you find a short, well-constructed text and mix up the sentences, asking students to reorder the text and identify the textual cues that helped them to do so. (an example follows).

Rayme: How could I get students to use more powerful descriptive words?

Jeff: Page 98: Hang wimpy words around the room with a slash through them. Hang powerful words around the room for kids to use in their descriptions. (We would do this as a class.) (Page 100) As a class, you can look for process descriptions in newspapers. (Page 101) Here’s the heart of the matter for process descriptions, explanations, and directions: you absolutely have to imagine and accommodate the reader. This text structure is designed to help a reader understand and/or do something. Other good mentor texts include Why I Sneeze, Shiver, Hiccup and Yawn by Melvin Berger, Mr Putter & Tabby Learn to Write by Cynthia Rylant, and Born Yesterday: Diary of a Young Journalist by James Solheim.

Rayme: Can students free write after hearing one of these examples? Do any other fellows do this in their classrooms?

Jeff: Writing after models can always provide powerful opportunities to notice, name and apply different tools for describing a process. BSWP fellow Anna Daley uses a technique called “Author Says/Author Does” to focus her students on noticing and naming. “Author Says” leads to a recounting or summary of the main points – the declarative knowledge of substance to be taken away. “Author Does” focuses students on procedural knowledge of form: how is the author structuring and conveying this substance through her construction of the text. What signposts, cues and navigational structures are being provided to guide the reader to get the major details and point of the text?

It’s sometimes fun to critique poor models or to follow a negative model. The poet W.S. Merwin’s essay “Unchopping a Tree” provides such an opportunity and can be found at http://www.getnewvisions.com/teaching\_stories/unchop.html and several other places on-line.

After reading this essay, students can be asked to look at how Merwin uses the process and transitions and structure of process description to describe doing something impossible. Students can then be asked to write about something impossible to reverse, like recovering their lost innocence, unmowing the lawn, taking back gossip, undoing a bad haircut, etc. Students have fun describing how to reverse something that is impossible to reverse, and doing so in a logical, clear and orderly way.

Rayme: How could I use comparison writing with Shakespeare?

Jeff: Page 131: During our most recent teaching of the unit, we read Julius Caesar as a class, and most of the students compared the influences on a character in that play to the influences in a situation they had experienced in their own life.

Rayme: Do you recommend any movies?

Jeff: Page 133: You should watch *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*!

Rayme. Ok. By the way, what are benchmarks?

Jeff: Page 147: Benchmarks are where assessment rubber hits the road. If benchmarks, descriptions of actual accomplishment meeting a criterion, cannot be composed, then students don’t have a clear declarative understanding of substance or form. And if they can be composed: well this is sufficient proof that students own the declarative knowledge. By meeting the benchmark and explaining how they do so, they show they have procedural understanding. We often tell the preservice teachers with whom we work: you don’t have to make up tests – the world is filled with testing situations. And if students can perform the knowledge we teach them, then learning is displayed and demonstrated beyond all dispute.

Rayme: Hmmm I should use googledocs in my class more to see students respond to other students and so I can respond electronically as well. So what could I do to teach classification?

Jeff: Page 165: The children’s book *Time to Eat* by Steve Jenkins & Robin Page also provides a good example of a classification scheme that can work in a mystery pot. We have found that our students enjoy all of these activities immensely, regarding them as a kind of puzzle to be solved. And as we’ve heard the cognitive scientist Sherry Turkle maintain: puzzles have a naturalholding power.

Rayme: There are always problems in the world that we face. Can’t we just teach students to problem solve after the problem occurs?

Jeff: Page 172: In contrast, we want to cultivate – both in ourselves and in our students – a problem-seeking and problem-solving mentality. We want to encourage proactivity versus reactivity: a tomorrow mind instead of a yesterday mind. It seems to us that denial or just plain avoidance is an all too-human problem - and it needs solving!

Rayme: Oh yes, that’s a better idea. Do you recommend any other books for me to read?

Jeff: Page 193: David Schenk’s book The Genius in all of Us (2010)

Rayme: Wow, okay- thanks for all this information!

Jeff: No problem. Now go out and spread sweetness throughout the world!