Engaging Writing Activities to Increase Skills and Motivation for Middle School Students

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Engaging Writing Activities to Increase Skills and Motivation for Middle School Students

By

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Engaging Writing Activities to Increase Skills and Motivation for Middle School Students

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Problem Statement

Picture a typical middle school student. Yes, this may be a difficult image to gather, as there is no typical kid, but let’s try. While the world has developed into a fast paced, non-private, jungle gym of stimuli put at the fingertips of people young and old, a middle school student has a particularly unique mindset of this new and ever growing world. They know nothing different. People who have graduated high school, college and have started careers know a world before smart phones, social media and having everything they could possibly want just a button or keyboard stroke away. A 25-year-old knows what it is like not to be able to call someone in the middle of the supermarket, or have to look something up in a book when they did not know the answer, or having to watch the news to find out current events or read the newspaper to find out who won the baseball game that they missed last night. A current middle school student only knows the world where you can ask your phone a question, search the Internet to find every baseball statistic imaginable, or decide which movie to rent based upon an app on their smart phone, all from the comfort of their own room. The middle school student of today doesn’t hang out in the mall chatting with friends, they chat on social media; they just don’t understand the world any other way.

So why do we as teachers expect that these student’s classroom experiences should be the same as the ones had by people that have since completed their schooling? Frankly, it doesn’t have to be that way! Students of this generation should have access to
learning experiences relevant and applicable to the world they know, not a world that has since passed. As the world changes so does the way we as teachers need to teach students. In the ELA classroom there are many strategies to make learning both engaging and relevant to students.

In the middle school ELA classroom, writing is a fundamental skill that needs to be built up. A good grasp of language and structure are essential skills that can be fostered by embracing a middle school student’s lifestyle, interests and motivations.
Significance of Problem

Teaching students to write better is a difficult endeavor, especially to students who find it boring, or a chore that is only applicable in the classroom. It is my goal, as a teacher, to help students learn to write more effectively. But how is that possible when students see writing as a punishment, busy work or just another assignment their ELA teacher made them complete. Students learn best when they enjoy what they are doing, therefore, creating assignments that seem interesting and relevant to young people outside the confines of the classroom is the best way to help them learn and produce work that they are proud of and will remember for years to come.

Typical middle school ELA classrooms are jam packed with worksheets that ask students to fill in the blanks, write sentences, perform reading comprehension, answer questions based on a paragraph, match and define terms, answer true/false, and in general, bore them to tears. Students are also often tasked with reading assignments that have them read books, short stories and plays written decades and sometimes centuries ago which cause them to ask, ‘how is this relevant to my world’? Although there are benefits of using such methods of teaching, there are other, more relevant ways of doing so, methods that will be more meaningful, motivating and less disengaging to 11-13 year olds.
Purpose

Writing skills are part of daily life. They are even embedded into many activities enjoyed by middle school students. Because most students don’t think that practicing writing is important, the ‘how does this apply to me’ excuse is uttered on a regular basis in the classroom. The goal is to change the mindset of students.

Creating interesting, engaging lessons that teach the importance of writing skills should be a top goal of middle school ELA teachers. By using such activities, students will be motivated to improve their writing skills without being bored or feeling punished.

It would certainly be easy to pull lesson plans from our cabinets that have built up over the years, filled with things we created, borrowed or modified from others, but it’s not always the easy way that works best. Teachers’ main focus should be student success. What will get my students learning? We have to be prepared to give the answer…not that boring old worksheet or 19th century short story. The answer may just be something more creative.

Ask yourself… “What are these students’ interests?” Are they into stories about bears in the wilderness, or writing about their summer vacation, or are they into things like blogging, reading movie reviews, writing interesting status updates, attaching a funny caption to a picture or looking up directions to finding the locked universe in a video game? Each one of the latter examples are interests of 11-13 year olds, yet can be tools to teach and practice reading and writing skills. By creating lessons around such
areas of interest to students, they can use their creativity while being engaged in learning.
According to Raphael 2008, who performed a study to assess engagement in the classroom, “Low-level tasks, such as worksheets and drill and practice exercises…can negatively affect middle school students’ motivation and reduce on-task behavior”. With engagement and motivation being so important to student success, why are work sheets and drill and skill activities still so prevalent in the classroom?

Tedious and busy work, are some words that describe using worksheets and inauthentic activities in the classroom. I propose that using authentic, meaningful and relevant activities will help students transform their ideas of reading and writing from boring and pointless to interesting and inspiring.

If it means swapping out dated books, stories, plays and monotonous worksheets and drills with activities that are motivating and inspire creativity to get students to learn, teachers should be encouraged to create and use such activities. Because, “Writing for authentic purposes in authentic contexts can be vital to quality writing instruction” (Wilson, 2008), it is important to incorporate as many of these types of lesson into curriculum planning.

A study performed using middle school students found that participants liked using new literacy practices, such as the use of multimedia, digital tools, and digital products and performances. They found them “more engaging than traditional ones [e.g., reading school texts and reading passages and responding to questions in the supplemental reading program, writing in journals]” (O’Brien, 2007). Because students enjoy these types of lessons, projects, and activities, they will more likely be engaged,
enjoy the process and willing to work hard to produce quality work. Teachers don’t have
to teach writing strategies using worksheets nor do they have to use boring pre-made
reading comprehension paragraphs and stories to practice reading skills. It is the job of
the teacher to understand what types of activities will engage and motivate students to
succeed.

Essential writing skills include the use of detail, a rich vocabulary, sentence
structure, grammar, creativity, and having and maintaining a strong voice. Basic reading
skills are developed when students are able to understand meaning, and be able to
dictate what they read and remember important details. All of these skills can be
improved by using meaningful and creative lessons that are inspired by the technology
driven world middle school students are immersed in.

If a student is interested in cell phones, apps, video games, movies, fashion,
social media, sports, etc. why shouldn’t they be encouraged to improve their reading and
writing skills using those mediums? I feel that is it important to student success that they
use those areas of interest as much as possible. When interest and motivation are
increased, so will quality and hard work. Ultimately, it is engaging lessons that produce
the best outcomes and are the ones that students remember years after school is over. By
allowing students to learn through such activities they are more likely to have lasting
effects.
Definition of Terms

**Authentic Lesson**- A lesson in which the student learns a particular skill by using an application that is found outside textbooks, novels, stories, etc. These lessons rather, are applicable to the world

**Engaging Lesson**- A lesson that grabs the student’s attention because they genuinely like participating in, creating or producing the final product

**Online Technology**- Web based resources for lesson planning including social media, blogs, apps, websites, chat rooms, etc.

**Meaningful Lesson**- A lesson that the student will remember for years to come because it was authentic, engaging. The lesson helped them learn a skill that they feel will benefit them later in life

**Paradigm**- the model or standard; a pattern created and implemented over time and most commonly practiced

**Self-Motivated** – The student is self- motivated based on the value they see in the lesson

**Technology Driven World**- The decade plus that has seen the entire lifespan of an 11-13-year-old middle school student

**Traditional Assignments**- A lesson that makes use of worksheets, drills, reading comprehension, short stories, novels…etc.

**Typical Middle School Classroom**- The classroom lacks the assignments relevant to the needs and interests of middle school age students
Summary

In order to teach effectively teachers must first have the attention of the students. If students of today do not respond well to worksheet, drills, reading long outdated novels and stories, then why are more authentic and relevant methods more integrated into the curriculum. A teacher should have access to at her or his fingertips lessons that will grab the attention of students so they will be more likely to internalize the skills being taught.

Secondly she or he must be knowledgeable on the types of skills that are importing to teach to students. Several years ago it was commonly practiced to teach typing skills over cursive writing, making cursive almost obsolete. As times change, so must the areas teacher focus their teaching on? Print media is going away in favor of notepads, e-books, and computer based documents and websites. Due to this change it becomes more important that education also take that leap, making it easier for students to take those learned skills and apply it to their lives.

Lastly, the teacher needs to create lessons surrounding the interests and mediums that middle school students like and are involved in. Changing the traditional methods of practicing reading comprehension from the use of short stories and passages to reading things like movie reviews, online gaming manuals or blogs, students will have more motivation to participate, be engaged and will be more likely to demonstrate high levels of comprehension due to the investment they have in the activity.
Based on research, it makes sense that teachers shift the paradigm from traditional activities and lessons to ones that will create engagement, motivation and promote creativity based on the overall interest and relevance to students’ lives.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Effective teachers are not afraid of changing their teaching methods as the needs of their students change. Research shows that students are more likely to learn using lessons that grab their attention, therefore good teachers take that research and apply it to their classroom. Difficult as it may be to change, they make the effort so their students can reap the rewards.

Teaching writing skills in the ELA classroom is more about getting students interesting in writing then it is about teaching the actual skills. A recent survey of teachers and writers showed showcased the opinions of these professionals about good writing. What makes good writing? According to these professionals they strongly disagreed that good writing does not involve perfect grammar and spelling, a strong topic sentence/intro/conclusion, nor does good writing have to be free of mechanical errors. What good writing demonstrates is the writer’s ability to be honest and clear, it shows personality, is directed at the right audience and illustrates knowledge of the subject. (Nauman, 2011)

How can teachers get their students to insert personality, while being clear, honest and knowledgeable? The first step at achieving these attributes of good writing is to engage students in learning. Student engagement is the number one key to getting students to participate fully in lessons or assignments. Secondly, students must learn the strategies to successful writing, and lastly they should have the opportunity to use technology in their final project/assignment.
Importance of Engagement

Think back to your school days and try to remember lessons from your ELA classes. Which ones stuck out? The ones involving worksheets? The one where you looked up words to define? The ones where you wrote about your summer vacation or what you want to be when you grow up? Probably not. The ones that resonate will be the ones that made you inspired to learn, work and create. Maybe you were given choices within the structure of the assignment, maybe they involved the latest technology of the day, or maybe they just hooked you in because it involved things like competition, creation, or didn’t sound like boring schoolwork assigned to fill time and keep you working until the bell rang. These are the assignments that students remember forever, the ones they learn the most from and possibly save to one day show their children.

Solis 2008 defines engagement as “a perquisite of student learning”. A simple concept, if adopted by teachers, will help students enter each learning assignment with the tools necessary to learn and retain information.

Engagement is linked to student success in the middle school ELA classroom. If students are interested in the learning and participating in the lesson, teachers will avoid the dreaded three-word utterance…”I don’t care”. Those three words are detrimental to student success. If they don’t care about you, what you are teaching and how you are trying to teach it, they will zone out and muddle through the assignment on autopilot. Although some students are naturally gifted enough to pass and possibly even excel in
school on autopilot mode, they will never truly succeed in this mode of getting by, nor will they be able to reach their full potential. (Walsh, 2006)

Students need to feel noticed and appreciated for their unique personalities, interests and learning styles. According to Walsh, “accomplished teachers observe, study, and listen to their students”, they also gauge “areas of interest, emotional states, frustration levels, and behavior patterns”. Basically, getting to know your students is imperative. Lessons that worked 10 years ago will not necessarily be as effective for today’s middle school students. Technology has changed, media, pop culture and many other aspects of the world make today’s middle school student very different. Even given a classroom of students from 2013, from the same town there are bound to be differences in the students that makes it challenging to engage 100% of students 100% of the time. Getting to know your students is the best way to work towards the highest engagement percentage possible. Not only is it areas of interest, and personality that are important for teachers to know, Walsh believes that “practically everything about young adolescents is relevant information…including awareness and appreciation of each student’s cultural, linguistic, and ethnic heritage; home and community setting; socioeconomic status; special needs; individual strengths and work habits; prior knowledge and learning experiences”. Teachers need to act like a sponge and soak up as much information about their students as possible to best put together lessons and activities that will best engage them in learning and ultimately have the best possible outcomes.

According to Raphael 2008, who performed a study involving 9 teachers, “Teachers who emphasize understanding and tasks matched to students’ interests and
values stimulate more academic commitment than teachers who assign boring and irrelevant work”. They also tend to do their best when such lessons allow for autonomy. This practice works because students have an interest in the lesson and will take a sense of pride and ownership in the outcome.

Students are the best resources for determining engagement and why it is crucial for success. A focus group of middle school and high school students was conducted to gauge the barriers for student success in writing. The results were interesting. 36% of all comments related to student engagement. One student said, “There’s just nothing of interest. It’s a waste of time if you don’t like it”, another said, “why can’t we write about what’s happening today. Like what’s happening in the 21st century?”. The most poignant response was one of the last reported in the study. A student said, “The more you care about the topic, the more you’ll care about writing”. It was a simple statement, but so very powerful. (Hawthorne, 2008)

Given the choice to write about a short story written 100 years ago or to reflect on the events of last night’s controversial football game, students are more likely to want to write about the game because it happened today, is an area of interest for many, and is something that can be looked up and discussed online. These are the types of things teachers should be aware of when creating writing assignments: Is it relevant today? Is it an area of interest? How can I incorporate technology?

Engagement is a tricky concept to understand and even harder to apply. But if teachers get to know their students, experiment with unique lessons that are relevant, interesting, and incorporate technology the likelihood students will be engaged rises significantly. Teachers want the best outcomes for their students; by making
engagement a top priority, teachers will be well on their way to achieving student success.
What Successful Writing Looks Like

Writing is a difficult skill to perform and an even harder still to master. How can teachers get students to move past the “I don’t care” attitude and see writing as something useful, expressive and worth their time? Because students do not see value in writing they are asked to do for school, they do not put much effort in the process. According to Fisher, 2006, “society today needs a literate workforce who can read and write accurately for a range of purposes”. Less pressure for students to adhere to a formulaic system of writing (boring school writing), will lead to the development of more unique writing styles that will be useful in the workforce. Ultimately, good writing is writing that goes beyond the structured doors and walls of the classroom, and lets students’ personality, ideas, and voice shine. Getting students to produce writing with those elements is the key to writing instruction: instruction with a purpose.

Often, students will produce writing that meets all the criteria of an assignment. But does that mean the writing is good? Just because a piece of writing has an introductory paragraph, a topic sentence, a body with several details and a conclusion does not guarantee the writing is good; it means students have understood exactly what they need to do to pass. They regurgitate the cookie cutter formula set forth by teachers and the schools see that as good enough.

It is however, the standards that have “led to suppression of creativity and the enjoyment of writing”. Enjoyment is a key aspect they being lost among the rudimentary standards that dictate every necessary element students must have on their paper. Because students “are being taught to write to a formula”, aspects of individuality
and style are replaced with a checklist. Will writing with a formula in mind produce readable work? Perhaps it will, but the result may be “lifeless prose”. Writing for the sake of writing. Students hand in this type of writing, the teacher grabs the stack and starts reading the first paper. Each paper is so similar to the previous one that she wonders why she is even reading them. Why spend time reading each one when she already knows what they involve? This is the same attitude students have about these types of assignments. Why should students be excited about writing when the goal is for everyone’s assignment to look the same? (Fisher, 2006)

It is true that the basics should be understood and implemented in student work, but it is not the most important aspect. According to Fisher, “writing is bound by conventions but it is the task of the teacher to enable the child to learn these conventions without their losing the awareness of how writing can be used …for their own purposes”. If it were the goal of education for students to stop using the skills they learned after the completion of high school, then maybe teaching conventions, and a formula would suffice. However, the goal of education is for students to take the skills they learned in school and apply it to their life, and career.
A Strong Model

According to the book *6+1 Traits of Writing*, the keys for good writing are: ideas, word choice, voice, organization, sentence fluency, conventions and presentation. Using these elements as a guide, teachers can introduce lessons that are more thought provoking and engaging.

Although teachers can come up with good ideas for students to write about, ultimately the best ideas come from the mind of the student. They are more connected to the assignment when at least one element comes from them. Word choice is an important aspect of good writing. Repetition of the same word, or not using the best word can lead to misunderstanding by the reader or lack of interest. Voice is something very difficult to teach a young writer. It comes with practice and continuing to write pieces that are of interest to the write. A strong voice will never develop if students are only allowed to write structured, formulaic and heavily standardized papers. The next three, organization, sentence fluency and conventions are elements of writing that are developed over time and interwoven in the curriculum. They should not be taught as individual lessons, but rather practiced within a given lesson. After all, when concepts are taught within a context, they are more likely to be understood. The last trait of god writing is presentation. Although presentation is not directly linked to the writing process, it is an important aspect that motivates students to write better. With the promise of presentation, students are more likely to be motivated and engaged in the process because they know their work will be shown to others.
But perhaps there is one more key element that will motivate good writing among middle school students: The use of technology. With each passing year, new technologies arise that make our lives easier, more fun and more connected. Middle school students of 2013 only know a world where high-tech technology has been at the center of innovation. Because of that, they have a harder time using such archaic technologies as the pen and paper, paperback books, note cards and chalkboards. Teachers must understand this and make strides to make as many lessons as possible involve the mediums that students are most comfortable with. (Nauan, 2011)
Involving Technology

Middle school students are familiar with the use of technology, often even teaching their parents and grandparents the ins and outs of smart phones, websites, apps and social media. Growing up with all of this at their disposal, it is no wonder they miss these technologies while in school, and why paper and pencil activities do not excite them.

By incorporating online tools, social media, websites, blogs, video games, apps, and many more sources of technology, students will have the opportunity to combine their love and understanding of technology with their classroom activities. According to Sweeney 2006, “students should be allowed to reframe or recontextualize their day-to-day experiences, including personal connections to media, to develop a…way to connect their outer lives (media) with their academic lives”. By doing so, their education becomes a relevant part of their lives. They will not only gain relevance of their education to their world but will “develop their digital fluency while also strengthening their traditional literacy skills” (Hoffner, 2008).

Teachers who have the mind set that technology is ruining students and they should put down the phones, stop listening to their music, lay off the video games and ignore the hourly updates to their social media are ignoring the fact that the world has changed. Shying away from technology will not be helpful to a group of students who will enter the workforce surrounded by technological innovations. They need to be immersed in as much technology as possible to keep up with modern changes and progress.
By incorporating projects that involve the use of technology students become more connecting and engaged in learning and the learning process. An article by Zenkov 2009, outlined a project by an city school over a 4 month period. Students were asked to take photographs, with a camera provided by the school. The goal was to use those pictures to help describe the purpose of school, what helps you succeed and what gets in your way of success. These photos along with the descriptions students provide after, acted as a scrapbook of their school experiences. The overall goal of the assignment was to “use the (se) photos and reflections to engage a wide audience in discussions of adolescents’ perceptions so that more school constituents would understand these point of view”. This assignment engaged students to voice their opinions of school and what they need to be successful. The authentic writing that was created showed the ability of students to produce quality work; they just need some creative outlet and motivation to produce.

One of the projects was a picture of a school clock. The big white clock with black hands and a red second hand covered in a plastic dome, sitting right about the door. Part of the caption read, “it’s a constant reminder that schools can act as prison when teachers don’t teach, when students are forbidden to collaborate on what they are ‘Taught’”. A poignant statement and s striking image that shows how much distain students can have for the learning process. The use of technology, the camera, allowed students to capture a real image of their school and write honest feeling about it. Had the students been asked to draw a picture instead the effect might not have been as effective. Students physically got up, thought about what they wanted to capture, took
photographs, had them developed, and used those images to produce a description that was meaningful and true. (Zenkov, 2009)

Another article, this one by Sweeney, suggests what teachers have been experimenting with the use of iPods in the classroom. A controversial issue to many teachers and principals, iPods can be a useful tool when used correctly. According to Sweeney, it is important to use “television, movies, comic books, and other media with which children interact”. Like television and movies, music is an important aspect of life for many teens. By creating a classroom Podcast for students to use, they are incorporating an aspect of digital technology. By playing around with different ways of incorporating technology, intuitive teachers are reaching their students by tapping into things that interest them, thus creating engagement with the intended outcome of learning and retention.
Active Learning

Sirinterllikei, 2009 defines two types of education, traditional formal education and active learning. In traditional formal education, “Students typically learn in a didactic manner…taking notes within a classroom lecture setting”. Although that may work for some students, research shows that “such a passive environment is not effective and results in limited retention”. If students are not retaining information, they are not actually learning. Remembering long enough for the test or final project is not helpful nor is it indicative of actual learning. Active learning, on the other hand, ”is an instructional methodology that engages students in the learning process …involves using multiple senses, interacting with other people and materials, and responding to or solving a problem”.

Wrapping Up

For teachers to succeed at creating lessons aimed at improving student-writing focusing on areas of engagement, active learning and involvement of technology are key. Students must feel immersed in their education and connected to the elements. If they are engaged they will focus and care about the outcomes. When active learning takes place, students are not just taking notes and later spitting out the information, but they are taking charge of the activity and learning by participation, thus gaining the experience required for absorption of knowledge. Lastly, when elements of technology are added to a lesson, a level of comfort and interest are gained. Middle school students are so familiar with technology that when it doesn’t exist in the lesson, a level of discomfort exists.

At the core of a good teacher is the desire for student success; the goal is to figure out the best method to attain that success. Research has shown that students learn best when they are active participants, are engaged in the lesson and if elements of technology are present. By using these tools when creating lessons to teach writing skills, teachers are more likely to achieve student success.
Chapter 3: Application

Unit Overview

Research shows that when lessons are engaging, active and involve technology, student motivation and success rises. When creating a unit plan focused on improving writing skills it is important to keep those three factors in mind. Adding detail is one of the most important aspects of good writing. Being able to convey exactly what you want via the written word is important for reader understanding, interest and enjoyment.

This unit, comprised on 4 mini lessons and a cumulating individual project, aims to meet the standards outlined in the unit overview, while keeping engagement, active learning and technology in mind. Due to the fact that the unit is very technology driven, the ideal classroom will have access to a class set of laptops, tablets or a computer lab. Although class period lengths vary from school to school, these lessons are designed to be implemented in a school with 80-minute class periods. Generally, this means the class meets two or three times a week (twice one week and three times the next). Each lesson could however be modified for a more traditionally 40 minute class.

The students in the class for which the unit is meant are in 8th grade and are a heterogeneous mix: a classroom of higher, average, and lower achieving students, and a balanced blend of both boys and girls. Taught towards the middle of the school year, the culminating project may act as a midterm exam.

This chapter is comprised of four mini lessons and the culminating project, which makes up the unit on Detailed Writing.
Unit: Detailed Writing

Subject & Grade Level: English Language Arts 8

New York State Standards:

1: Students will read, write, listen and speak for information and understanding.
2: Students will read, write, listen and speak for literary response and expression.
3: Students will read, write, listen and speak for critical analysis and evaluation.
4: Students will read, listen and speak for social interaction.

Overall Unit Objectives:

From Standard 1

-Write accurate and complete responses to questions about informational material
-Write on a wide range of topics, both student and teacher selected
-Write accurate and complete responses to questions about informational material
-Use a variety of strategies to plan and organize ideas for writing, such as keeping a list of topic ideas and a writer’s notebook, using graphic organizers, etc.

From Standard 2

-Revise writing to improve organization, clarity, and coherence
-Edit writing to adhere to the conventions of written English
-Work collaboratively with peers to plan, draft, revise, and edit written work
-Write, using a variety of media to communicate ideas and information
- Engage in writing voluntarily for a variety of purposes, topics, and audiences

- Publish writing in a variety of presentation or display media

From Standard 3

- Present clear analysis, using examples, details, and reasons from text

- Select content and choose strategies for written presentation on the basis of audience, purpose, and content

From Standard 4

- Share the process of writing with peers and adults; for example, write a condolence note, get well-card, or thank-you letter with a writing partner or in small groups

- Write personal reactions about experiences, events, and observations, using a form of social communication

- Develop a personal voice that enables the reader to get to know the writer
Lesson 1: Cartoon Yourself

Objectives and Description: Students will practice writing descriptive words by creating a cartoon and adding descriptive captions. This lesson is intended for two class periods of 80 min each.

Materials: Internet, computer, bitstrips.com, comic book creation tools (ex. comic creator.com, makebeliefcomix.com), art supplies/paper cut into comic panels.

Anticipatory Set: 10 min

Students will be given a ten minutes to peruse the website, bitstrips.com. This is a website and Smart phone application that allows users to create an avatar and insert their avatar into a pre made comic strip or in a commix strip with a friend who has also created an avatar. I will ask students to be able to tell me as much about the website as possible.

Lesson:

Part one: 30 min

- Teacher asks students to form groups of 4-5
- Students have 10 minutes to discuss and write down elements of the website
- What did they observe, how does it work, what are the components…etc.
- Share with the class, as teacher writes down the ideas in the front of the class
- Teacher pulls of examples from the website. Example: two people in a car that is flying off a cliff. The two people look very excited
Teacher has students discuss what a possible caption could be…ideas are given
Teacher then shows one more picture and has each student create their own caption
Students will then be given a choice to two possible activities to practice adding descriptions to a picture.

Part two: 40 min

Students have the choice of high tech or low tech
High tech has students go to a website that allows for the creation of a comic strip. They will choose a website and create a 6 panel comic strip without any captions. Print!
Low tech has students use markers, or colored pencils, to create an illustrated 6 panel comic strip without any captions
If students do not finish in the class period, they are permitted to finish at home, after school or during a free period.

Part three: 30 min

Students will take out their comic strips
They will have the remainder of the class period to individually create captions for their comic. They must keep in mind that the comic should tell a story and be as descriptive as possible.
Students must keep in mind that the comic should tell a story…who are the characters, what are they doing, when and where is it taking place, why are things happening. Think about describing things like smells, sounds, emotions, etc.
Wrap Up/Check for Understanding:  (assuming 20 students in the class)

- Presentation!
- Each student will briefly present his or her comic to the class.
- Teacher will hang up the artwork/assignment in the classroom

Engagement ➔ Student interest in the use of a popular website

Active Learning ➔ Creating a comic strip

Technology ➔ The use of websites as a research tool and creation mechanism

Lesson rationale

This initial lesson, aimed at getting students to write short detailed descriptions, is a perfect start to a unit on descriptive writing. By using comics as a canvas, students are able to get creative while only having to write out short descriptions, rather than having to write for long periods of time; getting them started using good descriptions on a small scale will not overwhelm them right away.
Lesson 2: It’s All About Me?

Objectives and Description: Students will compound a list of descriptive words by creating a description chart that describes him or her. Students will also formulate a brief autobiography, thus practicing using descriptive words.

Materials: Internet, computer, wordle.com, paper, pencil

Anticipatory Set: 10 min
Students will have 5 minutes to come up with 10 words that best describe him or her. Students will then be asked to share a few with the class. Teacher shares his or her own.

Lesson

Part one: 40 min

- Students will open a blank document and start typing a short autobiography.
- Students will write down as many details about their life as they can think of
  - Family, friends, interests, hobbies, talents, likes, hopes, dreams, goals, achievements, etc.
- Students are also encouraged to ask classmates to help come up with ideas
- After 40 minutes students are asked to save the document and name it: ‘it’s all about me’

Part two: 20 min

- Students will log on to the website, wordle.net
From there, the teacher will walk students through the website and instruct them to upload the document, ‘its all about me’ to create their own unique wordle blueprint (wordle.net asks people to upload a document or create a document within the website. It takes the words and uses a formula to create an image of differently sized, colored and positioned words. The words that show up most frequently in your document will be larger on the image than words used less frequently)

The result should be an image of words of varying sizes, colors and positions that describe each student. Words the student used more frequently will be bigger and in the foreground.

Students will print their results

Students will compare the results of the blueprint with their descriptive words from the beginning of the class. Are the biggest words on the blueprint some of the same words you used at the beginning of class?

Wrap up/Check for Understanding: 10 min

Students will be asked to answer these questions:

1) Which was easier? Coming up with 10 words that describe you, or writing a story about yourself and have a formulaic system come up with the words based on the story? Why?

2) Which was more effective… Coming up with 10 words that describe you, or writing a story about yourself and have a formulaic system come up with the words based on the story? Why?
Engagement → Writing about a familiar and interesting topic, themselves

Active Learning → Creating a tangible piece of art

Technology → Use of a website to upload a document and create an image

Lesson Rationale

What is sometimes the easiest topic to write about? ME! By having students write about themselves, they have the most first hand knowledge as possible, making it easier to come up with details and descriptions. Students are not being judged on the writing them produce about themselves; rather it is a way to coming up with a piece of work that provides details and descriptions. Once those descriptive words have been formulated, students are asked to write and answer questions, which push them to figure out why writing detailed descriptions can be challenging.
Lesson 3: The Reviews are in!

Objectives and Description: Students will practice using descriptive language by first looking at movie reviews, then creating their own.

Materials: computer, Internet, paper/pencil

Anticipatory Set: 15 min

Students will think about their favorite movie. On a piece of paper students will write down the movie title and as many aspects that make that movie great. Class will share ideas.

Lesson:

Part 1: 30 min

- Teacher asks students to use the movie, *Toy Story*
- Students are asked to explore movie review sites like, mrqe.com, rogerebert.com, metacritic.com, etc. to discover the formula for review using the movie *Toy Story*.
- Students will work in pairs to jot down elements of review. What elements do each review share? What makes each site/reviewer different? Does there seem to be a formula each reviewer employs?

Part 2: 25 min
Teacher pulls up two or three websites (tabs), and students share their findings with the class. Teacher prompts them to answer several questions about the elements of review and what makes some reviews better than others.

Wrap-Up/Check for Understanding: 10 min

Students will be asked to write down the ten essential elements of review based on their research on the review sites and the class discussion. They will use this list to write their own review for the next class.

Homework: (Ideally given on the last period before a weekend)

Students are asked to research/watch a movie for which they will provide their own review (PG-13, PG or G rated movies only). Good, bad or a combination of both elements, this review will be written in the next class. Students will have access to a computer to write, but will not have access to the Internet. Their reviews need to be authentic and not be influenced by another reviewer. They are welcome to come to class with a prepared list of items they wish to reference in the review along with any materials compiled from the previous class.

Engagement ➔ Writing/researching about a topic of interest: movies
Active Learning ➔ Active research and class participation
Technology ➔ Use of a website interactive websites to gather information and typing their own reviews to act like professional reviewers
Lesson Rationale:

By researching the structure of movie reviews, students will understand what elements are present in a good review; what makes one review better than the next. They will understand that details and strong descriptions make a review stand out. First understanding what makes a review strong leads into the next part in which students create their own review. Creating a review can be challenging, but with knowledge of the elements and structure, and being able to use a movie of their choosing, they will have the tools necessary to write a strong review rich in details.
Lesson 4: It’s Peanut Butter Jelly Time!

Objectives and Description: Students will create a set of direction/steps to create a PB&J sandwich. A demonstration will occur and students help the performer by writing down each detail in the process. Students will learn that every detail is important and leaving out steps can lead to misunderstanding and an unfinished product.

Materials: Peanut butter, Jelly, Plate, Butter Knife, Plate, Loaf of Bread, Pencil/Paper, SmartBoard/Projector

Anticipatory Set: 10 min
Ask students to think of all the words associated with a peanut butter and Jelly sandwich. They will then, come up to the board and take turns writing down the descriptive words they come up with. After words like fluffy, creamy, gooey are written, class will discuss how words like these help paint a picture of eating the sandwich; how it helps people see, feel, taste and experience the sandwich.

Lesson:

Part 1: 40 min
- Teacher takes out a bag with a jar or peanut butter, a jar of jelly, a butter knife and a loaf of bread and places the on a table set in front of the class
- Students pull out a piece of paper and a pencil
- Students are asked to write down the steps it takes to turn these ingredients and tools into a peanut better and jelly sandwich. Remember to write down every step!

- Teacher walks around the room to see the progress students are making.

- Teacher stops the class and ask a student to read their steps as her or she attempts to follow the steps.
  
  - Example- Student: Put jelly on bread
    
    Teacher: How can I put jelly on bread when I haven’t even opened the jelly?

- Teacher explains that they need to write down every step, not matter how obvious the action may be. Teacher says: The first step should be something like: “reach with your hand and grasp the bread loaf. With your right hand slowly twist off the tie several times until the tie releases. Open the bread bad and pull out two slices. Place the slices on the paper side by side.”

- Teacher asks students to write down these new steps on the back of their paper and continue the steps from that point.

- Teacher says that the challenge is create a set of steps that a student can follow and will result in a perfectly constructed sandwich. Teacher will pick one person’s set of directions (the most detailed) for another student to perform.

- Now that students understand that they have to write down every detail, it becomes a challenge to write the most detailed set of directions.

*Part 2: 20 min*
Teacher chooses a student and coaches him or her to only perform steps that are read and picks a student whose directions are clear and very detailed.

The demonstration progresses and the students take turns reading directions and performing the task. If steps are missed, students orally tell the performer what steps have to occur to accomplish the task. (Teacher meanwhile, is sitting down the steps the student describes as well as the oral steps the class utters. This will ensure that a complete detailed list is written down.)

Wrap-Up/Check for Understanding: 10 min

After the list of steps is complete, students are asked why it is important to describe every detail of the steps? It's just making a sandwich, but when giving directions, why is more detail is better? Think, what if the person had never seen a PB&J before? Don’t they need to know how much peanut butter to add, that they should mix the jelly before spreading it, that the bread should be sliced in half or quarters?

Engagement ⇒ PB&J is something familiar to all kids, a topic for which they should have background knowledge

Active Learning ⇒ Active participation in performing a task, giving directions and creation of a product

Technology ⇒ Use of the SmartBoard/projector

Lesson Rationale:

Although this lesson is low on technology, it is high in engagement and active learning. Incorporating an easy task, like making a sandwich, gives students a good amount of
background knowledge so they can focus on writing and not thinking about whether they are using correct information or not. Teaching students with a hands-on assignment allows them to understand how giving the right about of detail is important. If they forgot a step, the sandwich process will stop. Details are important and they will realize how important each detail is and try hard to give as much as possible for the sandwich to be complete.
Lesson 5: Project \(\rightarrow\) It's All in the Details

*(See project guideline sheet in addendum)*

This project asks students to choose a something they are an expert on or can quickly become an expert on. They will write a detailed description of their topic: ‘How to______’. In addition to the description, students will present their topic to the class. Topics can be presented in a variety of ways.

*Engagement \(\rightarrow\) By choosing the topic, students are more invested in the assignment*

*Active Learning \(\rightarrow\) Active participation in presenting their topics*

*Technology \(\rightarrow\) Use of many tools to create their paper as well as presentation: Internet, Computer, video games, movie clips, SmartBoard, PPT…etc.*

*Project Rationale:*

This final project incorporates all previous lessons about including details in writing. Students get the opportunity to learn more about their chosen topic and share their interest with the class. They tap into their creative side while formulating good writing full of details!
Chapter 4: Conclusions and Recommendations:

Improving writing skills is important for middle school students. So much focus of teaching is getting students to pass standardized tests/. However, there is a lack of relevance to students in activities aimed at tediously practicing test taking. The aim of this project is for teachers to step out of the bubble of standardized test drills and allow students to practice the same skills in a more meaningful and relevant way.

The literature review in Chapter 2 of my project shows that engagement, active learning and involvement of technology are keys for student success. Lessons that incorporate these essentials are more successfully implemented than lessons that are more traditional and lack elements of fun and modernity. Positive outcomes and student participation are best attained when teachers create lessons that have relevance to their student’s lives.

The Unit, detailed in Chapter 3 is designed to be engaging, active and incorporate many element of technology. It allows creativity, ownership of the product, and is tailored to students’ unique perspective of research, production and application. Student access prior knowledge and use topics of interest to learn how to develop writing full and rich with detail.

The overall goal of this project is for pre-service and current teachers to understand that students need more than worksheets, drills, and lectures to learn. They need to be interested in learning, be active participants and use modern technology to have the best possible educational experience. It is time for education/educators to stop shying away from new methods of teaching and modern technologies and see them as
opportunities for students to flourish. It may not be the easy way to teach, but ultimately it will be worth while when students are engaged in learning, succeed and genuinely like coming to school.
References


Addendum

This section contains all of the written assignment/lesson aids that are part of the unit plan, including the final project.

1) Comic Strip Guidelines

2) Check for Understanding Questions from Lesson 2

3) Movie Review Homework/Class work

4) Check for Understanding Questions from Lesson 4

5) Project Outline

6) Rubric for Final Project
Make Your Own Comic Strip

Directions:

Illustrate a 6 panel comic strip by either using an online comic maker like, ex. comic creator.com, makebeliefcomix.com or go low tech by illustrating one on a piece of comic panel paper

Create Captions for your comics. Each panel is part of a story and should progress is a sequence, ending in some conclusion. Captions should be as detailed as possible. The comic should answer these types of questions:

- Who is involved?
- What are they doing?
- Why are they doing it?
- Where does it take place?

Present to class!

Example

(Copyright How-to-draw-funny-cartoons.com 2008-2013 - Images Martin Berube)
Check for Understanding Questions: Lesson 2

1) Which was easier: Coming up with 10 words that describe you, or writing a story about yourself and have a formulaic system come up with the words based on the story?

______________________________________________________________________.

Why?__________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________

2) Which was more effective: Coming up with 10 words that describe you, or writing a story about yourself and have a formulaic system come up with the words based on the story?

______________________________________________________________________

Why?__________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________
At HOME…

1- Choose a movie

2- Ideally, watch the movie

3- Research the movie

4- Jot down notes about the movie’s highlights

5- Come to class prepared to write a movie review!

At SCHOOL…

1- Use the tools gathered from last class to write a movie review of your chosen movie. This review can be a good review or negative review, or a combination of both

2- This should be typed, 12 pt font

3- May include graphics

4- Should be at between 1-2 pages double-spaced

5- Details, Details, Details!!! Entice the reader to watch or if negative, not watch the movie
Check for Understanding Questions Lesson 4

1-Why it is important to describe every detail of the steps?
______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________.  

2-It’s just making a sandwich, but when giving directions, why is more detail is better?  
Think, what if the person had never seen a PB&J before? Don’t they need to know how much peanut butter to add, that they should mix the jelly before spreading it, that the bread should be sliced in half or quarters?
______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________. 
Project ➔ It’s All in the Details: HOW TO_________

For your project you will create a paper that explains ‘How to______’.

➢ You need to choose a topic that interests you and that you are an expert in, or can quickly become an expert on.

➢ Examples are: How to …
  o Throw the perfect jump shot,
  o Beat level 3 of video game X
  o Bake a chocolate cake
  o Win at Candy Crush Saga ®
  o Build a model car

➢ The paper must be 2 typed, double spaced pages using 12 pt Times New Roman Font

➢ ½ of the grade will be the paper, the other half is the presentation

  o Paper is graded on conventions of grammar, length, sticking to chosen topic and most importantly the amount of detail you add
  o Presentation is graded on length, creativity, and how well you demonstrate the knowledge you have of your topic

➢ Presentation should be about 3-5 minutes and highlight the keys of your paper. Use whichever medium you wish, PPT, video clips, demonstration…etc.

➢ Be creative and be as detailed at possible!
Rubric for Final Project

**Paper**

<table>
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<th>Category</th>
<th>Points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Grammar/Conventions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Length of paper</td>
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<tr>
<td>Topic Focus</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Details</td>
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</table>

**Total** /50

**Presentation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Length</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstration of Knowledge of topic</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total** /50

**OVERALL TOTAL** /100