

Wenona School: Writing to Learn

Interim Report – Term 3, 2023

Brief description

The primary objective of Wenona School's *Writing to Learn* project is to investigate the effectiveness of targeted approaches for improving writing proficiency among late primary and early to mid-secondary students. The project aims to examine how such an approach impacts student confidence and achievement, as well as the effectiveness of the instructional capacity of teachers in developing literacy skills across multiple curriculum areas (other than English).

To facilitate this, Wenona is endeavouring to create a shared pedagogical understanding and knowledge of literacy strategies to build collective efficacy in the teaching of writing across faculties and learning stages. Our expected results are to see an improvement in both teacher confidence and student writing ability, as well as building a school environment that has a more cohesive approach to support student transitions between academic stages of learning.

Wenona engaged in this project in response to the stagnation and decline in Australian students' writing abilities over the past decade (AERO, 2022). As a school committed to empowering young women, we recognise the critical role of literacy proficiency in empowering students to reach their full potential and participate fully in life beyond school.

Approach

Wenona's project is ambitious in its scale. Inclusive of Stages 3, 4 and 5, the project involves a student population of close to one thousand and incorporates the Science, Social Science, History and PDHPE curriculum areas. The research study investigates the extent to which a targeted approach to literacy instruction, namely the Literacy Teaching Learning Cycle (Derewianka & Jones, 2023), improves students' academic writing. The potential of this targeted approach is to be examined by observing writing lessons in participating classes, interviewing teachers and students and analysing selected student work samples.

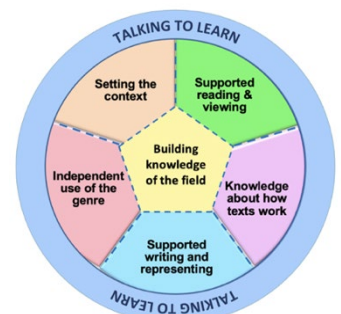
The project is being led by a core team:

- Natasha Isbel, Dean of Research & Ethics (Project Lead);
- Nicole Timbrell, Deputy of Professional Practice and Culture;
- Trish Davis, Dean of Academics & Data Analysis;
- Amy Webb, Head of Middle School; and
- Carlie Plummer, Head of Curriculum & PYP Coordinator.

This team works collaboratively with the various teaching staff and faculties involved with the *Writing to Learn* project, guiding the project and facilitating its practical implementation. It reports directly to Wenona's Principal, Dr Briony Scott and Senior Deputy Principal, David Cook. Associate Professor Pauline Jones and Professor Beverley Derewianka from the University of Wollongong also support the project as academic mentors. Ms Jones and Derewianka are pre-eminent practitioners within the field of literacy education, both nationally and globally.

Progress to date

Wenona launched the project in January 2023 with a full K-12 staff development day facilitated by the academic mentors. This professional development session focused on *Literacy as a Tool for Thinking and Learning*, providing a global overview of best literacy practices across all curriculum areas. Staff unpacked the concept of literacy, explored the role of reading, writing and oral interactions in learning across all disciplines and were introduced to the concept of a literacy continuum moving from highly constrained skills to highly unconstrained literacy skills (Paris, 2005). Staff were also introduced to the *Teaching Language in Context* learning cycle as a model to phase comprehensive understanding in making meaning during literacy processes (Derewianka & Jones, 2023).

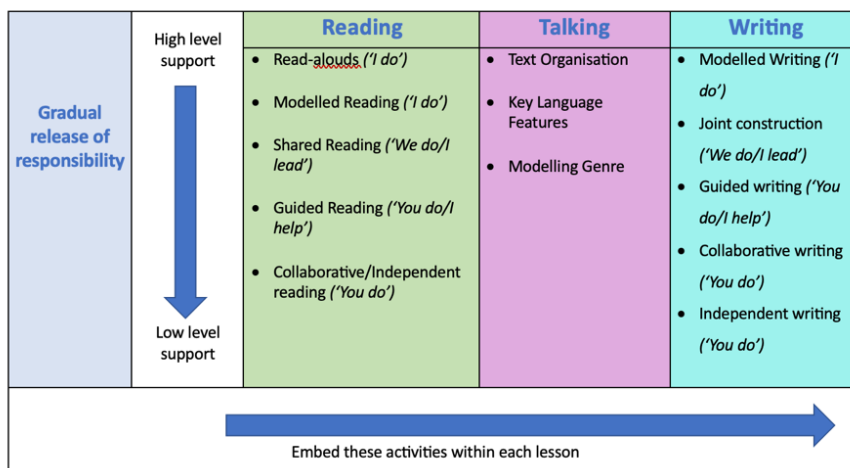


The initial design intention for the project was to create a literacy toolkit that was applicable across stages and faculties. Whilst this remains the final objective for the project, adjustments have been made for the different

learning paths for primary and secondary staff members. These changes were made in collaboration with the project mentors who identified the need for a differentiated approach due to the context of Wenona Junior and Middle Schools, and the foundational skill set of teachers from both spheres.

The Wenona *Three Pillar Instructional Framework* was developed to guide professional development for Stage 4 and 5 which has occurred regularly throughout 2023. The framework was based on the research by Jones and Derewianka and focuses on reading, talking and writing as interdependent foundational literacy practises. Secondary staff have participated in intensive professional development throughout the year focused on building expertise relating to each pillar. This included unpacking corresponding literacy interventions to facilitate student confidence and success. Faculties have then integrated chosen interventions to adjust teacher and learning programs to trial within the classroom.

3 Pillars Instructional Framework: Reading, Talking & Writing



Wenona Junior School is part of the International Baccalaureate Primary Years Programme and delivers a transdisciplinary curriculum. Since the Stage 3 transdisciplinary curriculum units already heavily foregrounds literacy skill development, the decision was made to focus on the whole of the *Teaching Language in Context* learning cycle (rather than core components of it, as has occurred in Senior School). Furthermore, Stage 3 has integrated a second tier of literacy interventions responsive to student needs to extend teachers' professional skill sets. The design of these interventions has been supported by mentor Pauline Jones.

Evaluation of project status to date

Overall, the *Writing to Learn* project is progressing as expected, given its ambitious scope and size. Gaining ethics approval for the project from the University of Wollongong took longer than initially projected. As a result of this delay, the collection of data to examine the impact of the project has been slightly delayed but is expected to commence mid-Term 4, 2023. Participation consent letters have now been sent to the parents/caregivers of the students whose data will be collected and analysed in the project.

Action research in schools requires agility and flexibility. Throughout the project design and implementation process, issues of resourcing, logistics, managing competing demands on teacher's time and staff changes have needed to be managed. To date, these challenges have been successfully navigated and have been used by the core team as an opportunity to reflect and reassess project priorities. Pleasingly, teaching staff have engaged strongly with the aim of creating a shared pedagogical understanding and knowledge of literacy strategies to build collective efficacy in the teaching of writing across faculties and learning stages.

Where to next

The second phase of the project will focus on the collection of data to examine impact, as well as further professional development in literacy interventions. Reflection on collected data will play a key role in enabling both student and staff voice within the project and designing specific interventions responsive to feedback. As a baseline understanding of global literacy practices has been firmly established, the project mentor role will shift to providing differentiated professional learning based on stage and faculty needs.

What you would like from AIS

Wenona appreciates the AISNSW support and guidance received to date. We would benefit from further support relating to strategies and tools to collect, analyse and present qualitative data associated with the project. An

References

Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) Ltd. (2022). *Writing and writing instruction: an overview of the literature*. <https://www.edresearch.edu.au/sites/default/files/2022-02/writing-instruction-literature-review.pdf>

Derewianka, B., & Jones, P. (2023). *Teaching language in context* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.

Paris, S. G. (2005). Reinterpreting the development of reading skills. *Reading research quarterly*, 40(2), 184-202. <https://doi.org/10.1598/RRQ.40.2.3>