UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING (UDL) AT HOME; HOMEWORK WEBSITE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Final Report

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Introduction

This project was intended to create a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) homework website that would appeal to our students for numerous reasons. The two main components we focused on were reading comprehension and writing for students in *français langue seconde* class. These were the two competencies we deemed as being most in need of support. By developing their reading and writing abilities through structured and meaningful homework, our goal was to see students create a stronger foundation when learning in french class. We curated for them various writing prompts that would guide them in writing a multitude of different texts each month, and used their expressed interest in certain subjects to provided reading comprehension texts at four different levels for them to continue to learn and consolidate new vocabulary. We eliminated traditional worksheet homework, and instead provided assignments that were intended to help them work on precisely what was being taught in class, as a way to fortify our lessons. We explained our intention behind this UDL homework website to our students and their parents, thus making our goals transparent and their motivation to complete work greater, as the more work completed, the stronger a reader and writer they would inevitably become.

Project Description

Our initial intention was to ameliorate a pre-existing grade 3 homework website and create and complete a fully functioning grade 4 website for this same purpose. However, two of our participants were placed in cycle 3 and we therefore decided to adjust the PDIG as well. We created a grade 6 website instead. For our reading comprehension portion of the homework, we used and modified a series of pre-existing texts as well as wrote our own, based off of various Internet articles and available research. This caused some challenges as modifying material for a grade 6 level takes significantly longer than modifying material for grade 3 or 4. Therefore,

we decided to focus solely on the grade 6 website and hope to improve the grade 3 website in the future. Ultimately, we were able to create and implement this homework website throughout the year. We are also looking forward to adding more material next year.

Our process was based on a set schedule. We met every two months to plan the writing goals that were to be taught. Collectively, we decided the types of texts that we wanted our students to learn to write, based off of the Progressions of Learning for Cycle 3, Year 2, Elementary (Progression des apprentissages Français, langue seconde-Programme d'immersion, 2009). Such texts include but are not limited to: narratives, descriptive texts, formal letters, opinion pieces, newspaper articles and personal journal entries. We also created tools that they could use to model their writing after. These tools have been included as attachments to this eport.

To keep students aware and accountable of their writing, we also established a colour-coded self-correction method. This would have students assign a particular colour to a given written feature (e.g.: identifying properly conjugated verb endings in red). Upon completing a written work, they would use our colour-coded system to identify certain elements of their work. If a particular colour was missing (e.g.: adjectives in orange), they would be able to quickly visually identify the missing element and then add it in. Simply put, it is an effective visual editing tool.

Additionally, the reading comprehension texts were made to be in the same writing style that the students were exploring that month (i.e: Students would be reading newspaper articles and learning to write them simultaneously). They had ample models available to them from their reading comprehension section that we called ''J'aime Lire'', which helped them understand what the forms of writing should look like. These texts were also used in class to show the students what they should aim to produce. Next year, we would like to build a bank of student sample texts at various levels. This will allow them to have visual references of where they are currently in terms of their writing level (e.g.: satisfactory, exceptional, etc), and examples of how to improve.

Near the end of the academic school year, we used the individual grant days to work on improving the website in order to optimize it for following years. We did so by adding supplemental texts to the webpages of the months that we felt were in need of a wider variety or greater quantity of texts.

Through student and parent feedback, we were able to see what needed to be modified and/or rectified. For example, if a writing prompt was unclear, we reworded it, or if instructions needed to be more specific, we added the necessary guidelines.

Project Goals

The goal of our project was to create a UDL homework website to help anglophone students in Cycle 2 French Immersion elementary schools improve their written composition and reading comprehension skills. By providing students with a wide range of texts and prompts, the goal was for them to have the option to choose which reading comprehension and writing activity most appealed to them, to ultimately complete as homework. All educators involved in this Professional Development Innovation Grant were and still are passionate and excited about providing access to pedagogically beneficial material to students of all levels. From our experience this year, the results have been unilaterally positive as students once reading at a significantly below grade 6 level, who had little to no reading comprehension strategies, are systematically approaching texts with the desire to search for meaning in new words and use their gained knowledge to solve complex words. Students who were already reading at high proficiency are implementing the advanced sentence structure they see in their reading comprehension, in their written texts. Ultimately, we have seen that regardless of their level, the students that have actively and consistently completed weekly reading and writing homework this year have all improved in both competencies. This is due to them working within their zone of proximal development, which allowed them to each improve at their individual level.

Despite us being able to provide our students with a functional homework website this year, we believe that it can still be enhanced. Work must still be done to ensure that we can provide our students with texts that meet their ever-changing interests. Our ultimate goal is to continue adding a variety of different texts available at each level so that our students can select readings based on their interests.

Our homework website (for student/parent use) can be found here:
http://westpark6.weebly.com

Project outcome

By working together on this goal, we were able to combine our individual strengths in creating a comprehensive website. Some teachers we more comfortable with technology while others had a better grasp of the Progressions of Learning and ways of effectively teaching certain text structures. We used this opportunity to learn from each other as educators. The teachers who were less proficient in computer technology worked diligently to improve their digital text-editing and webmaster skills. The technology savvy teachers were able to study the Progressions of Learning more closely as it related to their students' reading and writing levels. This allowed them to develop samples of student work produced that will continue to serve as examples of their progress through our program. By working together, we we able to create the best possible tools for our students while ensuring the consistency and continuity between classes.

By the end of the project, all four teachers had a proficient grasp of the different skills and tools needed to guide grade 6 students to higher levels of learning. We are looking forward to working together in the future to add to these tools and develop new and innovative teaching techniques.

Reinvestment

The website we have created can be used as a template for all teachers and could be modified to suit their students individual needs. There are also helpful tools available for in-class work as well as homework. We have made available all the writing tools necessary to complete the different written styles on our website. We have also included an example of our colour-coded self-editing model. This system can easily be adjusted based on the needs and goals of the given students. We noticed that when the students implemented their colour coded system for editing, their writing improved significantly. We strongly encourage all teachers to use this system.

Though this project began in a singular grade, it is now being implemented in various grade levels at our school. Teachers within our school have used the same template and simply adjusted the material to suit the level of their classroom and students.

We highly recommend this project be carried out in different schools by other teams. It can be completely modified to suit any given teachable subject matter as long as the teachers focus on the fundamental reading and writing skills that we have encouraged throughout this process. Given the success of our program within our school community, we believe that it can similarly benefit other schools with specific needs.