

Small Changes Inspire Huge Gains in Fourth Grade Essay Writing

Sustainability Education (SE) can be a mysterious proposition for the uninitiated. Immediate questions arise: What is sustainability? Why is it important? How is it incorporated into school learning? And, how can schools possibly consider anything more with their already packed agendas and strapped budgets? The simplest and most comprehensive response to these questions lies in a fundamental tenet of SE: Children can acquire the concepts and values necessary to create a sustainable future through small modifications to the existing instruction in their primary classroom subject areas of math, science, social studies, and English. In fact, such small adjustments can yield impressive dividends in student achievement of standards based content objectives. A striking example of this principle in action is my recent collaboration with Theresa Lavelle, a fourth grade teacher at C. V. Starr Intermediate School in Brewster, New York.

As a launch for her unit on essay writing, Theresa invited me as a guest speaker to her class to tell a brief story about the environment, technology and society. My visit lasted all of 30 minutes. Her goal was to provide a context for students to generate relevant and motivating thesis statements for their essays. In using my story she also sought a context that would make the essential components of a thesis statement (the relationship between “topic” and “cause”) easily accessible to students.

My story told of the human quest in the 20th century to improve the quality of life for all human kind, largely through the invention of new technologies and systems, and that making the world a better place for humanity was the most noble and universal of all human endeavors. We discovered that when problems are solved, new problems are inevitably created, and those in turn need to be solved. As an example I cited the development of DDT to increase agricultural yields and its problematic effect on bird populations. I also explained how the creation of refrigeration technology to prevent food spoilage in the effort to reduce hunger caused the problem of releasing chlorofluorocarbons that break down the ozone layer. Both of these problems were not foreseen, but have since been addressed by the thoughtful action of citizens, governmental regulation, and scientific innovation. Next we examined problems with our current energy system that still need solutions. We traced the creation of electricity from its source, beginning with coal from a mountain mine, to the burning of coal in a power plant that sends smoke into the air containing global warming causing carbon dioxide. We also discovered the effects of the mercury contained in the smoke on the fish we eat and acid rain caused by sulfur dioxide. It was made clear that when people first began creating electricity this way, they did not know they would create any problems. It was empowering for all the students to realize they could be part of history, just like others before them, by making changes to this system in various ways, starting with conservation of electricity. This would be their moment!

The next day Theresa stopped me in the hall: “That was utterly amazing yesterday—I have never seen the kids so motivated!” Theresa noted how her students’ thesis statements were on a higher level than she had ever seen before. She went on to note, “The thesis statements came together so effortlessly, and the students now have a deep understanding of their construction and role. Even little J. B., who has been disengaged all year, could not wait to begin writing about ‘how we saved the American eagle from DDT.’” Her students were more eager than ever before to begin writing their essays, with continued discussions emerging in the days following.

Theresa was emphatic how the SE context had resulted in her students being invested more deeply in the writing process. Their motivation and sense of purpose was instrumental in helping them achieve her essay writing objectives in punctuation, grammar, word choice, sentence fluency, idea development, topic focus, details that support a thesis, and more. Supplying this context took little more than 30 minutes of extra class time, yet it created an enormous shift in the student’s thinking about their future, their power to affect change, and their understanding of the modern world. And of course, everyone wins when students’ improved essay writing abilities raise ELA exam scores.

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