Triple R Teaching

In today's episode, I talk with Dr. Lorraine Hammond. She is from Perth, Australia and is an experienced lecturer and teacher, researcher, workshop facilitator, conference presenter, you name it. I was privileged to hear her speak at the Plain Talk Conference where she talked about a whole-school approach to teaching vocabulary and also how to incorporate writing instruction into that. We'll touch on a lot of things today, but that is the main focus of our conversation. Here we go!

Anna Geiger: Welcome, Dr. Hammond!

Lorraine Hammond: Oh, hello Anna! How lovely to be meeting with you!

Anna Geiger: Thank you so much for joining me! I really, really enjoyed the presentation that you gave at Plain Talk this winter about teaching writing called "Teaching Writing Is Like a Magician's Hat: You Have to Put Something in to Get Anything Out." I would love to talk today about teaching writing, and in particular, a theme of your presentation which was integrating vocabulary instruction with writing instruction.

Before we do that, could you introduce yourself and tell us about your career and what you're doing now?

Lorraine Hammond: Well I'm an associate professor in the School of Education at Edith Cowan University, which is in Western Australia, in Perth, which is considered the most isolated city in the world. We are a long way from everywhere else, so it was an absolute delight to make it to Plain Talk and to meet such wonderful people and listen to such great speakers.

I've worked in the area of literacy for a very long time. Unlike you who I think began as an early childhood teacher, I began as a secondary teacher, and a fairly arrogant one at that, who thought that that was the thing to do. I was exceptionally good at reading and writing, and that's why I chose to be a secondary teacher.

I'll make the point that being good at something is a big adult blind spot for us as teachers. I just assumed that everybody could read and write and could they possibly just try a little bit harder.

When I met lots of adolescents who couldn't read, I decided I need to go back to university and figure out how to teach reading in particular, so that has been very much my work since I began as a teacher.

I have the great fortune these days to work across Australia in lots of different places, supporting the teaching of literacy and vocabulary, and writing is one of the things I enjoy supporting teachers with the most.

Anna Geiger: When you started learning about how to teach, was that a whole language time in Australia? Did you learn the wrong thing and have to relearn it, or were you in the right position?

Lorraine Hammond: I didn't learn anything, Anna, I was a secondary teacher, unfortunately, and now I work with secondary teachers at my university. In fact, I recorded the lecture on reading for them last night and wanted to explain to them how reading happens, so even if you're not that person, at least you understand how to do it or how to get help.

No, unfortunately, I think that many of the young people that I met in my first years of teaching were indeed the result of whole language, which was adopted with great enthusiasm across Australia, and I think many of them were largely instructional casualties. I was convinced they were all dyslexic at first and, of course, they weren't.

So no, I had to go back to university, and interestingly, I had to study areas that weren't really readily available to anyone at the time because very much the dominant way of teaching was whole language, which has now been replaced by balanced literacy.

But I'm proud to say that in my university, we have a reading position paper and we take very much an evidence-based approach to the way that we prepare our graduates.

Anna Geiger: That's wonderful, just like La Trobe.

Lorraine Hammond: Just like La Trobe, absolutely.

Anna Geiger: Getting into writing, why is it that writing is such a challenging activity? You mentioned how when you're good at writing, it gives you a blind spot. I've always enjoyed writing myself, and it is hard to break it down and to see what in particular makes it so hard.

Lately my two middle boys, they're in eighth and sixth grade, had to write a report for science, and so I actually did break it down with them based on things I'd read in "The Writing Revolution." It was things like, let's take our notes, let's write our topic sentences, let's put the notes or the details under each one.

It helped a ton, but I normally wouldn't think about breaking it down that much, so what makes it so hard?

Lorraine Hammond: You use a really good example. If you even think about it from an adult perspective, as well as preparing lectures, I'm marking papers, and I'm asking my students at the moment to write about something that they don't know an awful lot about.

We think about what happens when you write, and you need to have a topic in mind. You have to know what you're going to write about. When it comes to the putting of the pen to paper or the fingers to the keyboard, that's the first barrier for some young people.

Then they might have trouble with the act of writing or typing. They might be hunters and peckers, so they're very slow. You're looking at accuracy and fluency around handwriting, typing, then spelling. Can you actually spell those words? Can you string a good sentence together? Can you use a range of sentences? We don't want to read a simple sentence and then another simple sentence; we need some variability. We have to think about vocabulary, getting into combining sentences and the complexity of it.

Then, in your mind, you're having to hold all this information because your boys are writing something about science that they might not know terribly much about, so they have to construct.

There's an awful lot of secretarial skills that have to come together, as well as the fact that you're trying to hold all this information that you know and may be unfamiliar with in your head. Then of course, if you're a university student, we ask you to reference as well, and that can really be the straw that breaks the camel's back because there's just too much going on.

I think that the more that you can put into long-term memory and automatize, the easier writing is. If we can say handwriting is actually just happening automatically, children aren't worried about how to form letters, they're not struggling.

If we think about punctuation, if that's automatic, then you're not having to think about, "Oh, I need a capital letter. I need end punctuation."

If you think about even the genres, if you have in your head as you would have in your head, "Okay, a report looks like this. A narrative looks like this." All of this we are requiring students to do.

It's a very brave teacher who goes into a classroom, in my view, on a Monday not quite prepared and thinking I'll just get them doing something, and says, "Okay, everybody, how about you do me a recount on what you did on the weekend," while I locate the painkillers for my headache and get organized for the day.

The problem being that a recount has a structure and it has all those elements we just talked about, including probably four paragraphs: an introduction, firstly, secondly, thirdly, maybe even a concluding paragraph. There's all that language involved in it as well as the spelling, everything.

For a lot of children, what you will simply get is, "On the weekend I played soccer." Full stop. That's as good as it's going to get. Knowing what that extended piece looks like, which you and I assume they would, no, no, they don't necessarily know. It's highly complex.

Anna Geiger: When I look back to my writing in school, that is very familiar. I just remember a lot of writing prompts. I like to write and I like to read, so I think I did okay, but I remember writing finally came together for me not until I was a senior in high school when our teacher taught us how to write a thesis, and he just broke it all down. There was a structure, and now I don't remember much about it except that it made a

lot of sense.

After that, I really, really enjoyed writing reports because I understood how it all went together, but it took until I was 17 before someone taught that to me.

Lorraine Hammond: I guess what you're saying and what I'm suggesting is possible with children of all ages, it's that you're showing them how the sausage is made, and I didn't know that.

I remember, maybe similarly to you, I was just really good at writing. Somehow I found, and it might've been at the library and I think it might've been from a student who was much older than me because I would've still been in primary or elementary school, as you would call it, but I found this list of words like however, therefore, and on the other hand. I was like, "Oh, wow, this is great! I could use this in my writing!"

Like you, I was entirely self-taught. I don't even remember anybody at high school even saying to me, "Okay, so you need an introduction." I was very much taught in the era of just keep writing, just keep writing, just write it down, we will fix it up later.

If I think about my first year of teaching, one of the things that I did do, which in hindsight was really effective, because there's plenty that I did that wasn't terribly effective I'm sure, was I said to my students, "Right, so we have to write an essay. I'm going to write you the essay. I'm going to explain paragraph by paragraph what is going on."

I think at that point, I'd had the epiphany and realized just because I can do it, they can't necessarily do it. Making it very clear for students I think is a great place to start.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, and that's one of the marks of a good teacher is breaking things down to their smallest parts, which can be hard to do.

You talked in your presentation about a school-wide approach to vocabulary instruction, which you combined with writing. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Lorraine Hammond: We'll get to writing, I do promise, in just a moment, but let's just

look at the value of teaching vocabulary for children and for their teachers.

For children learning vocabulary particularly, and I'll defer to Isabel Beck here who I had the great fortune of hearing speak some years ago, you're teaching kids big words that they don't necessarily hear in spoken language, but they are likely to encounter in writing.

What we want them to do is to be able to read those words, so if you have that word already in your head and you know the meaning of the word and you know the spelling of the word... Here's an example, coeliac, which is a shocker, C-O-E-L-I-A-C if you're Australian or British. In American you have an easier time of it because it's C-E-L-I-A-C. It's much easier because it actually looks like celiac.

If you've heard the word coeliac, coeliac, coeliac, and then in the case of my son, who at a very young age saw it on a menu. I asked him, "What's that word? What's that word?"

He said, "Oh, it's coeliac."

I said, "How do you know that?"

He said, "Well, at the end it's got liac, liac, and it's a menu. I think it's coeliac." Having that word in his head enabled him to decode it.

It's great for decoding; it's very important. It's great for reading comprehension. Then of course, it's going to improve the precision of your writing if you can choose better words.

I think if you're in the business of teaching anything well, vocabulary and writing go together really well.

It can be hard for teachers to teach vocabulary. I have to just mention my very patient master student, Dr. Wendy Moore. Spoiler alert, she went through to do her PhD with me, and who put up with me coming back from listening to Isabel Beck and saying, "We should do something on vocabulary! This is really important."

You can imagine the withering look she gave me because she hadn't actually finished her masters at that point. She said, "Okay, all right."

We ended up looking for words, and we realized that there aren't very many great words in the kind of books that teachers like to read to kids, so having a very structured approach to vocabulary is powerful.

Teaming it up with writing is simply pragmatic for me. I know that many of my beginning teachers that I work with in schools struggle to know how to teach either vocabulary or writing, and writing is a particular challenge for them. Sometimes they've come through university and they've simply learned about the stages of writing and that you must present some sort of stimulus for the young people, and they will write. They don't know the nuts and bolts of it.

Combining the two is really pragmatic. You've hinted at an explicit approach where we break things down. Both of these topics, vocabulary and writing, can be broken down really well and taught regularly to students with great effect.

Anna Geiger: I think you talked about starting this pretty early in a child's journey. What grade would that be in Australia and then translate for us in America.

Lorraine Hammond: Okay, so it depends where you live in Australia. The young people that I would predominantly work with in schools come to school at the age of four, and they do two and a half days a week.

With very young children, well, you've got some choices. You might do something around a concept called shades of meaning.

You would teach the children saying, "Girls and boys, here are some synonyms for happy. Synonyms are words, they look different and they sound different, but they mean the same thing. Here are some synonyms for happy: content, joyous, ecstatic, over the moon, on top of the world. Those are idioms, girls and boys."

I'm borrowing the words of my colleague and friend Brooke Wardana here, "When I put

my hand down, I want everyone to tell me another word for happy," and they would call out their word. Then over the course of a week, you would teach all those words because they have slightly different meanings and slightly different versions of happy.

Then at the end, you'd actually rank them for the children, so content might be less happy than ecstatic or euphoric. Students would learn that there was a hierarchy, if you like, of happiness, and that's where you might start.

Other schools would say for our children who are five, which for us is called Foundation, and that has various names across the states of Australia, but we would say pre-kindergarten maybe for you. They're five, and it's their first year of formal school. We might have a theme, and the theme might be pirates, and the students might be doing a word like scruffy, which is a word that they might not necessarily know.

So they'd be doing scruffy, and then they would just do one word across a week, working their way up to when they get through to year six where they would maybe be doing maybe six to eight words a week.

As children work their way through the primary school experience, particularly in the schools that I work in, we have one theme per week, and the themes have to be highly relevant to the students. When I go to the Kimberley, we have rodeo as a theme because rodeo is a really big deal in regional and remote Australia, but it's not such a big deal in a metropolitan school. We might have something around a royal show or a circus if you know that's an experience that the students are going to have.

Anna Geiger: I think in your presentation, you talked about having the same theme for the whole school, is that true? It would be across the grades, and then the words change by the grade?

Lorraine Hammond: Yeah, so there is a theory behind that. I guess it started when Dr. Wendy Moore and I were looking through children's books and realizing that there wasn't a lot of aspirational language in the kind of readers or the materials that teachers like to read to students. If they were pulling out a word, they might do it in an incidental way and say, "Oh, this is an interesting word," and they would talk about the word and move on, and students' retention of that word and the meaning was very low.

As I said, if you want to be serious about doing this, then you do have to put the prep work in beforehand. Schools who do it well in my mind have about... Well, depending on when you want to start, we have roughly 40 weeks in a school term, so we would have

40 themes. They would run across the year. Of course, if your school is doing something particular in a certain week, that might be harmony week or we have talk like a pirate week. If you're into Star Wars, May the 4th, so you have a variety of things, but a lot of these things are interchangeable in the sense that you can have heroes and villains or you can have Star Wars, and they're going to have very similar words.

Then the next bit is you sitting down with your staff, although there's now a number of these plans floating around on the internet, but this was pioneering work that I did.

I have to acknowledge Jordan O'Sullivan and Jared Bussell, two of my former students who went up to work in a school in regional Western Australia, and then having done amazing things there, came back to Perth and started up in a school that I'm the board chair of. I've had a long relationship with this school, and they came up with this way of actually teaching vocab.

As I said, it all started with Isabel Beck and my enthusiasm, but we fast realized that maybe determining the words beforehand was better than hoping that they might turn up in books. Also, if you think about some books, certain words will turn up a lot, and so it's better to perhaps have your own systematic approach to teaching it.

If I think about talk like a pirate week, we might have one word maybe when the children are in the first year of school right up through to maybe up to eight or ten words, depending on how much time you're going to give this. So yes, it is actually scoped out.

For the words themselves, you will sit down with a bunch of teachers and it's quite miraculous. They'll go, "No, no, that can't possibly be a year two word. That has to be a year three word because it has this suffix at the end, and we don't really do that until year three, so let's put it there as opposed to year two." There's a bit of shuffling around, but it means that if you're on week 12 of the school year, everybody's on the same theme. This means that the teachers know what the teacher before them would've been teaching the children, as well as what's coming next.

The whole point, if you are going to go to the trouble of doing this, is to have the young people come out of elementary school with about 1,200 Tier 2 words. Words that, as I said, are like serendipitous and verdant, which means luscious and green. Words that they might not necessarily encounter that they can then use also in their writing.

It's the prep beforehand, because not only do you need the words in place, you also

need child-friendly definitions, and that's the work of Isabel Beck. We need to have really simplistic definitions, so if the word was malevolent, you would want the children to be able to know that "mal" means bad. It means really, really bad.

If you think about the big five of reading - phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension - when they're very little, you're going to be spending a lot more time on the other elements as compared to vocabulary. With the word malevolent, that might come in at about grade three or grade four.

By that stage, you've eased up on the teaching of phonics and it's now more about fluency, and so you can afford to spend more time on words, but a word like malevolent is still going to be broken down into syllables. It's going to be broken down into parts, and "mal" means bad. We still want students to think about it because you want to spell the word as well.

I'm a big believer in yes, there will still be elements of phonemic awareness up the grades, but vocabulary is a great place to see it, because let's do something with that word rather than just try and remember it as a whole.

Anna Geiger: Can you walk us through a little bit of what it would look like to teach a new word to really young kids? Say you're talking about the word ecstatic, what might that look like?

Lorraine Hammond: Well if I was teaching the word ecstatic... Let's use the word euphoric because I did this just recently in the school.

I would say to very young children, "Euphoric means the happiest you have ever felt," and that would be a child-friendly definition. I would have a PowerPoint slide, and the reason why I would have a series of slides is because when I go to a school, I leave those with the teachers and then I say, "Use this as a template because the template should always be the same." Please don't kill yourself coming up with something really fancy because they don't have to be, but there are certain non-negotiables.

Again, this is the work of Jordan O'Sullivan and Jared Bussell who've really honed down on what the most important elements are here. The first slide would be a picture of someone looking euphoric and the word euphoric, and I would say, "Girls and boys, the word is euphoric. What word? Euphoric. I'm going to break it down into its sounds," and we do syllables and sounds, and we talk about some antonyms and some synonyms.

Then I would say, "Girls and boys, euphoric means the happiest you have ever felt. Girls and boys, tell your partner what does euphoric mean?" That's when you start to embed that child-friendly definition.

Then the next slide would be pictures, and they would be pictures of euphoric and not euphoric. A picture of euphoric might be a picture of Disneyland and you would say, "Going to Disneyland would make you feel euphoric!" Non-euphoric would be a child looking at a bowl of broccoli and the kids would go, "Oh, I would not be euphoric if I had to eat that." What you're trying to do is build in the children's mind that it's not just about winning a trophy; it can be about lots of different things.

Also when the children would be responding, they'd be telling their partner, "I would not feel euphoric if I had to eat a bowl of broccoli because..." and they would have to justify that.

Depending on the age of the children, there might then be some reading tasks. We'd have some little sentences that they would be reading with me off the screen, so I'm going to get some fluency practice in there as well and some decoding, and they would all be examples of euphoric.

Then it has to get to the point where I'm going to show students some pictures and I'm going to say euphoric or not euphoric, and they have a chat with their partner. You're building up this idea that euphoric can be a number of things.

What would then happen is a slide would come up and it would ask the children when they have felt euphoric. Only at this point would I do that because I'm pretty sure they now know what euphoric is, and then they would tell me their answer.

Then we'd swing into the next phase, which is going to be that sentence writing piece. I would say to the children, "We are going to write a who/what it did sentence." I would've previously taught them that the who is a noun, that's in green, and the what it did is in red.

I'd show them, "The teacher was euphoric because it was Friday." You give them some examples, "The boy was euphoric when he found out McDonald's was going to be building a store at the end of his street." I actually work some examples, and they're color coded as well.

Then finally, the students would have to write their own. I would say, "I felt euphoric when..." and then they would finish the sentence.

That's the little routine, and I'd probably do a second word depending on the age range of the children, and they have to put that together as well. Possibly the next lesson, they might combine those two words in a sentence. That routine doesn't take any more than about 15 to 20 minutes, but it's a consistent routine across the school.

The challenge for the teacher is the PowerPoint. If you're just inserting pictures and you're writing some sentences, it's not too onerous. You don't want the students to be wondering what's happening next, because it's a consistent PowerPoint, they know what the steps are here. They know what the steps are, and so if done well, it's just part of business as normal.

Sometimes with vocabulary, people will do it and then they'll just move on, but there's no opportunity for practice. If that was my class and we did euphoric today, well, at the beginning of my little lesson, I would have a review of some of the words we've previously taught. We're coming to the end of term one here in Australia, so I'd be using words from week one because I need to continuously be reminding the students.

Because we have a game plan, the school knows, the teacher in the class knows, here are my words. What I'll typically do is I'll have them printed on a sheet of paper, laminated up, and then put them around the classroom as they complete each list. That's a point of referral for the teacher to go, "Oh, I think you could use a better word than this. Have a look." It's also a reminder for the students, and the students do look at it as well.

You'll find that if you get into this, and I've seen this happen in lots of schools, suddenly groups will get names. So instead of the monkeys, there'll be the malicious monkeys because malicious was one of the words. Schools have often then used some of this language, the positive language, on merit certificates. I'm sure some parents are thinking, "Oh my goodness, I wonder what that word means?" There's a real attempt to embed it into what happens in the school.

Anna Geiger: Can you talk me through the difference and the application piece at the very beginning when they maybe don't even know their letters yet versus the other end of elementary? How does the writing piece look? Is there any writing at all? And when does that start?

Lorraine Hammond: Well, I have to defer to Brooke Wardana here, and she came up with something that's been very effective. She calls it quick, capital letter, one idea, end punctuation.

Now we're also very fond of "The Writing Revolution," so we will have fragments versus sentences. We'll do that orally with the children as well, because we're trying to establish with the youngest of children that, "Anna is," is not a complete sentence. We need to know something about Anna. From the beginning, they'll have a combination of sentences versus fragments, and they'll learn to identify, even if the teacher's reading it for them, what a sentence versus a fragment is.

At the same time, children will be learning single sounds, so the simplest of sentences they would write. I would strongly advocate for having children actually writing sentences themselves rather than copying from the board, because I don't know that that necessarily tells an authentic story to everybody about how they're actually doing.

Imagine you've got a smattering of single sounds and you've learned the irregular word I, which is going to be turning up a lot anyway in children's reading, then you can write a sentence like "I like" and I'll have to give them like, but then they can listen to the sounds in the word. The word can be cats, it can be dogs. it can be pigs, it can be frogs.

We will practice by putting out hooks, "I like..." and then they have to tell me the missing word. We'll do lots of oral language practice, and then eventually the children will sit down and the word that they're going to be writing is a word that I know that they can spell. The single sounds will be on the board.

I'll say, "Girls and boys, the word is dogs. Put that word in the air," and I'll point to the letters as I say it. Write that down. And so from the earliest stages, you're starting to get a complete sentence.

At the same time, we'd say capital letter, one idea, end punctuation. Students would see simple sentences on the screen that would not have one of those elements, and they would have to identify which element was missing and add it.

From the earliest stages, it's possible, I think, to start teaching writing, and then gradually you can go on from it. Remember, I'm a secondary teacher, so if I can do it,

you can, particularly if you know your children better than I ever will.

I've had to go in and teach a sentence structure that is a who, what it did, when. I've had to start at the very beginning with five year olds and say, "Okay, this is what a simple sentence is: capital letter, one idea, end punctuation."

In fact, we might even have some sentences versus fragments first, then we'll go over what the capital letter, one idea, end punctuation is. Then here are some sentences, because they're going to forget the capital letter. They're going to forget the end punctuation.

Then I will model an example, and I'll get the children to the point where they can see the color coding and they can see what's happening. They'll write their who, what it did, and then they'll put the when at the end, and I'll give them examples of the when. From a very young age, you can teach this structure to children.

Notice how I'm not using dependent clause and independent clause. It's quite hard for some teachers at this point in time. I think it will get better. I love the work of William Van Cleave and I think it's incredibly clever, but for some of my teachers, they're just not at that point right now because they don't know how to teach writing. By seeing it color coded, it really helps them and it helps the children as well.

Anna Geiger: In your presentation you talked about short writing often, long writing seldom. Can you explain what you meant by that?

Lorraine Hammond: Well, if you think about sitting down and writing a recount, you're not going to get there straight away. If you have lots and lots of practice on a daily basis at writing, and I do like "The Writing Revolution" for many reasons, but also because it says to teach them something and then have them write about it. It's writing in service of knowledge. Whatever you've been teaching students in any learning area from kindergarten all the way through to high school, you can get students to write immediately about it, and that helps them with comprehension.

If you think about it, I want my students to use appositives. Now, I've taught this to very young children. You go to the very beginning and you go, okay, before we do our little lesson on appositives and they write a sentence containing in appositive, I'll do a quick review because otherwise I'll have to prepare myself for disappointment because they will forget the capital letter and the end punctuation. We'll go through the basic structure of a sentence and the students will identify sentences, non sentences, and so

on.

Then I'll introduce the concept of the appositive. Now let's imagine we've been learning about the Great Barrier Reef. I'm sure your audience will know, that's a very famous natural wonder in Australia. have to set it up so the students are going to be writing about the Great Barrier Reef.

I can even, and I showed examples of this, I can have taught children some good vocabulary as well. I might teach them astonishing, remarkable, and I want them to use that in the appositive as well.

To bring all of this together, I'll teach them what an appositive is and how we can identify the nouns, so I have to pre-teach that beforehand just in case they've forgotten. I stack up all the things that they need to know before we get to the lesson on appositives, and I've also taught them about the Great Barrier Reef.

I might say "The Great Barrier Reef..." and then they know that's the noun. They have to tell me something about the noun. They'll pull that information out from what we've just been learning, "is home to many astonishing and vibrant sea creatures." We'll get a really lovely sentence there.

Now if children are doing this on a daily basis and they're high quality sentences, we can then glue all of that together to the point where we get to the recount, if you like, or maybe the narrative.

The schools that I work in have little formulas for narrative. They have little formulas for persuasive. The children know that in the first paragraph of a narrative, you're probably going to have a bit of dialogue, so let's make sure we've practiced that bit, because dialogue is very hard for everybody, including adults. They don't know where to put everything, so dialogue's tricky.

We might also have a sentence with an appositive in it, so let's make sure we've done that beforehand.

If children practice all these little sub elements and we say there are roughly five sentences in the introduction to a narrative, a bit of dialogue, we need to know something about the character, they might be speaking out loud. Then we might say

something about what they're looking at, and I might ask for a metaphor with that. All these little elements can come together if the students have practiced.

It's about establishing some stamina for writing, and if you're doing it every day and you're just writing one or two quality sentences, that will then transfer over into writing.

I think that's one of the big difficulties for teachers is that they teach writing, it doesn't transfer over. So whatever you've been teaching, you go straight into writing. With older students I'd use because, but, so. I'd use a sentence kernel from "The Writing Revolution," it's terrific. But of course, we've got to get a basic sentence under control.

I might say to the students, "Here are five words that we've been learning so far this year. I would like you to write me a when, who, what it did sentence," and you'd be quite surprised. The students will take two of those words, and they'll write a really great sentence because they know the structure. The way that we program it is alongside the vocabulary words.

A teacher who works in a high performing school in Western Australia will go into the classroom and will say, "Right, today we're doing this. These are our vocab words. Here are our sentence structures." The vocab words will parallel the structures, so if you're working towards narrative, you might be using different words than if you're working towards persuasive.

What we're trying to do is to establish all these little sub-skills, the meaning of the words, the spelling of the words, how to use them in sentences, how malevolent can be a witch. It can be the way you eat a biscuit. If it's a Tiny Teddy, I don't know whether you have Tiny Teddies, we have Tiny Teddies. You can chew their arms off. You can suck their legs off. The children learn that that's malevolent, and maybe doing something horrible to someone at school is malevolent as well.

You want kids to have that understanding of the spelling of the word and the meaning of the word across different contexts. They need to see that word appear in sentences on the screen. Then they need opportunities to practice using that word.

That's how you take it through to long-term memory, which is ultimately what we're trying to do here. We want those sentence structures to be automatic. We want students to automatically know how to do dialogue, how to automatically know how to use an appositive, and how to insert these really powerful words into the sentences as well.

Anna Geiger: So it sounds like you're talking about having a school-wide vocabulary program that is also the vehicle for teaching basic writing, so that at some point they have accumulated the skills to do longer writing. Is that what you're saying?

Lorraine Hammond: That's right. That's right. I think that writing can sometimes be an event in some classrooms, whereas I would not see it as an event. I would just see it as something that you do every day.

I remember the people that I started working with many years ago who are now principals in schools. My friend said to me, "I just get the kids to write every day, and then I have this record of how they are doing." She was very good. She taught them precisely how to write, and she could see the development.

I think that what we do every day we get good at, and I think the needs of practice is very strong,

Anna Geiger: I think some teachers might think they do writing every day. When I was in school it was free writing, where we gave the students ten minutes to write, write, write. We thought that somehow that was making kids better writers, but a lot of it was very sloppy.

As a teacher, I know I did some of that. I think I was supposed to be excited because they'd gotten so many words on the page, but I maybe didn't understand what they were writing. Or they were proud of it, but I couldn't make any sense of it.

We want to make that writing time be purposeful. When I look back to the writing workshop model, which I think some elements of that are supported by research, but in a lot of the writing workshop teaching that I did, certainly there wasn't much explicit instruction, it was just what I thought we needed to cover that day. It was mostly them writing and me just looking, but not quite knowing what to say always.

Do you think there is value in having that long period of writing, like the writing workshop allows for? And if you do or don't, why and how would that work?

Lorraine Hammond: Well I think that there absolutely is a need for it.

If I go back to the old days, I remember seeing the poster on the wall of parts of a paragraph: topic sentence, supporting details, colorful vocabulary, concluding sentence. That means a lot to you and I, but it doesn't mean much to the children in front of us.

I think that we can learn from the fact that writing is complex. Students need a very structured approach I think to be effective at it. It really helps the weakest of students if they can see the mystery behind writing.

I think like you, I would've been guilty of just writing and assuming that everybody could do it as well as I could. Modeling is important, but it's a fairly passive activity for the students, and it's making an assumption that by watching you, they're going to get good at it.

Whereas if we do take a little bit of control, and I'm not suggesting that the entire session would be explicit necessarily, but once they've got some sub-skills, then they can get to a really good creative place.

Certainly with the narrative structures and the persuasive structures that I've been talking about, people have said to me, "Oh, doesn't it stifle their creativity?" Well, no. If you can write a good paragraph or a good introductory paragraph to a narrative and it can be a good paragraph, then you can change it up and you can make it great, then your creativity can come to bear. But unfortunately, I think so many of our young people don't actually have that sub-skill there.

People talk about inquiry, and we've got a lot of inquiry-based learning going on in Australia. Inquiry is fine if you have the sub-skills to do it, but many of our young people don't have those sub-skills for writing a science report. These are all different genres.

I would suggest that a writing block in an Australian school that's following a high-impact instructional approach would start with a little daily review. Your daily review for writing should try and scoop up all those skills that you want the young people to apply to the final task. The final task could be a dictation, so you know that they're going to be writing a dictation. They will seem to have forgotten what to do with apostrophes of contractions, okay, so you might do a quick review on that.

The idea is, we can do a quick daily review for writing. It might have some work on punctuation or grammar. If you were going to be asking the children to write a piece that's figurative, then you're going to be doing nouns and verbs, you're going to be talking adjectives and adverbs. All of that will be stacked into that daily review.

Then you'll come to the actual task. Now, sometimes you'll need a whole lesson. I think that a lot of instruction around writing has to be very clear to the students. Compound sentences require a lot of effort because you need to know the meaning of the coordinating conjunctions, so that's going to be a lesson as well. At the end, I would like to think that you would be applying that knowledge in some way, and that would be the creative piece. That would be the narrative or the persuasive or the whatever that you were working on.

I think that would be a better workshop model than just writing, just keep writing, here's a stimulus picture, just keep writing, just keep writing. You can still have that stimulus picture at the end, and I use some pretty amazing pictures from Pobble 365. There are other places you can go.

The last thing you really want to do is to say to the students, "Write about what you did at lunchtime," because you don't necessarily want to know that. You still need that stimulus picture there. It's just that you're taking a little bit more control as a teacher, and you're not going to be as disappointed at the end, I think, in terms of what's missing.

Anna Geiger: Is there anything else that you'd like to share about writing before we get into sharing resources where teachers can get ideas and helps for doing this?

Lorraine Hammond: I'll just say that excellence is never an accident, and every teacher that I work with who is good at teaching writing has figured out what's the first thing to do and what's the next thing to do. They have a game plan, and it's quite controlled.

Keep in mind, it's always effortful. This is hard for young people. Just because we can write really well doesn't necessarily mean that they can, so breaking it down and providing multiple opportunities for practice is always going to be critical for me.

Anna Geiger: You talked about how teachers have a game plan. I know people always want to scope and sequence for everything, is there a place where teachers can go that can help them map this out for themselves?

Lorraine Hammond: Yeah, there are. It's currently archived, but there's a Science of Reading in Schools Facebook group that comes from Western Australia that has some excellent resources on it that people could download.

I'm loath to say it, but if you were to contact me, I could certainly help you get a scope and sequence. I know the reach of your podcast is significant, so not all at once, people, but I'll certainly do my best.

Yeah, that's what people want. They really do want that scope and sequence, and that's a great place to start because you can look at the words and go, "No, they're not going to work," but you'll rejig them and you'll make them work because you'll find alternatives.

I think, again, if teachers see precisely how to do it, that is incredibly helpful.

Anna Geiger: Just an encouragement to people who are listening, maybe to start thinking about putting a bug into people's ear at their school about possibly doing a whole-school vocabulary program. Then also if that's not going to work for now, teachers can certainly do this on their own. Choose some themes for the week as a starting point.

Lorraine Hammond: I should also mention that Anita Archer has some great videos on teaching vocabulary, and they're certainly something that I would use with older students. They're a great reference, and they're an easy download.

Anna Geiger: Yes. Well, thank you so much for sharing this! This was a brand new idea for me, this idea of the whole school having a system for learning words. Then it's really smart to take that time and teach some basics about sentences, even in the early grades, through oral examples by the teacher.

Thank you again. I really appreciate it!

Lorraine Hammond: My pleasure! Thanks so much, Anna.

Anna Geiger: You can find the show notes for today's episode at themeasuredmom.com/episode164. Talk to you next time!

Closing: That's all for this episode of Triple R Teaching. For more educational resources, visit Anna at her home base, themeasuredmom.com, and join our teaching community. We look forward to helping you reflect, refine, and recharge on the next episode of Triple R Teaching.