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### **A model for scaffolding writing instruction: IMSCI**

What if you were asked to write an insurance adjustor's report following a car accident? Could you do it? How about a legal brief on the subject of international adoption? Setting aside the fact that you would need to research the topic of international adoption, are you familiar with the genre "legal brief"? We may not know what sort of content is expected in a legal brief, nor do we know what form it should take. Often, however, we ask our students to write about topics they do not know much about, and we ask them to do it in a format with which they are not familiar.

Just as we know that readers bring their prior knowledge with them when they read and construct meaning, writers also need to bring prior knowledge to the act of composing meaning through writing. Often, though, teachers ask students to write in genres or modes of composition without building their prior knowledge of these types of texts.

Genres of writing do not develop in a vacuum; they are socially constructed to suit the particular purposes of the writer and the particular needs of an audience (Martin & Rothery, 1986). When we teach writing through genres, we can help students understand and respond to the expectations of writing situations. We can explain how and why texts are structured in certain ways (Hyland, 2004), and we can help students to understand how those structures work to support the reader's understanding of texts. When students are aware of the features of a genre, they are better able to organize texts, it helps them to understand the communicative purpose of a genre, and they become more aware of a reader's expectations of a text (Swami, 2008).

Teaching writing through a focus on genre also allows us to support students as they gain familiarity with the expectations and conventions of a genre. Using a social approach to learning, the teacher can assist learners as they compose texts that they could not compose independently. Using

modeling and joint production of texts, teachers support students as apprentices in writing. Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977; Vygotsky,1978) suggests that we learn best when learning is situated in a context in which students interact with each other and the teacher in meaningful, purposeful ways.

## **Background**

Genre study has been a popular method for organizing the writing curriculum in Australia, where educators became concerned that students were not being taught a range of text types and that “factual writing” (Martin, 1989) was being neglected. The instructional framework that developed to address this concern began with a modeling phase, followed by a joint negotiation phase, and ended with independent construction of a text type.

Genre study does not have to be rigid and formal in its approach. Ranker’s case study of a first grade classroom shows how explicit, or “overt,” instruction can be effectively integrated in situated practice (2009). Genres can be explored through an inquiry approach where many examples of a genre are examined, and teachers and students together analyze their features in order to construct a definition that is accessible to students. Once students have experienced examples of the genre, the teacher can model writing that genre and engage students in shared writing of the genre. Then students will more likely be ready to write independently. If the same genre is encountered again, less scaffolding will be necessary, but if a new genre is introduced, then the sequence can be repeated (Gibbons, 2002).

Based on social learning theory and genre study, I developed the IMSCI model for organizing and scaffolding writing instruction that sequences instruction in such a way that teachers can model both product (the genre of focus) and process.

### **IMSCI as a model for scaffolding writing instruction**

IMSCI is an acronym for a series of steps, based on the concept of scaffolding. “I” stands for *inquiry*. As a classroom teacher in the first and second grades, I integrated reading and writing instruction. During read-aloud, I focused on a particular genre for a week or two and engaged my students in an inquiry into the features of that genre. I would follow up this inquiry into a genre with writing instruction focused on that genre.

The “M” in IMSCI stands for *modeling*. After developing their understanding of texts that fit into the target genre, I modeled for my students how to write a text in that genre. I modeled how to brainstorm topics, pre-write using graphic organizers, draft, revise, and edit. The modeling was applied to every

phase of the writing process so that students could see (and hear me think aloud) about how to accomplish the task at hand.

Modeling was followed (or sometimes replaced) by *shared* writing—the “S” in the IMSCI model. In addition to modeling, the students and I co-wrote a text in the target genre. When students participate in the writing, they are engaged in making decisions about topic, sentence structure, organization, etc.—all the decisions they will make when they write independently.

The “C” of the IMSCI acronym stands for *collaborative* writing. As we gradually release responsibility to our students, an interim step between modeled or shared writing and independent writing is collaborative writing where two students work together to produce writing. They may produce one text, with each one taking turns being scribe, or they may write parallel texts that are similar but not the same. Decisions about this must be driven by your students’ personalities and abilities and your instructional goals. Collaborative writing is especially helpful for ESL students, who benefit from oral rehearsal of ideas and sentences before composing (Gibbons, 2002).

*Independent* writing is the final “I” in IMSCI. When teachers merely assign writing topics without teaching, they are essentially throwing non-swimmers into the pool and shouting “Swim!” from poolside. Students will be more successful writing independently if they have become familiar with the features of the genre during an inquiry phase, seen the teacher model the genre, and participated in writing in that genre through shared and/or collaborative writing.

### **In the classroom**

After I presented this model to teachers at a local elementary school, two of the teachers decided that the approach was worth testing out in their classrooms. Specifically, Mrs. Bagley and Mrs. Olsen wanted to teach their fourth graders to write historical fiction. The teachers and I discussed picture books that would be useful in the inquiry phase, and then they read aloud to their students a variety of books including *Baseball Saved Us* by Ken Mochizuki, *Rose Blanche* by Roberto Innocenti, *Sarah, Plain and Tall* by Patricia MacLachlan, and *A Year Down Yonder* by Richard Peck. As they read these books, they discussed the characteristics of them with the students. The students noticed that many of the books were

written in first person from one character's point of view, but that the books were set in the past and that some of the events or people were grounded in historical fact.

To build the students' background knowledge about local history, they took a walking tour of the historic sites of the town. At each location on the tour, they told the students stories of historical events that occurred. Students took notes on a graphic organizer (see Figure 1). When they returned to school, the teachers provided the students with a booklet that included photos of the locations and summaries of the stories that went with each location.

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Figure 1. Historic Main Street graphic organizer.

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The next step was to model for the students the prewriting phase of the writing process. The teachers modeled this step using an overhead projector so that the students could observe and participate. This step included both the modeling and shared writing elements of the IMSCI model. Students want to participate and the teachers found that the students were more engaged when they were allowed to make suggestions that the teachers incorporated into their pre-writing plans. Mrs. Bagley's pre-writing is shown in Figure 2.

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Figure 2. Mrs. Bagley's pre-writing.

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The pre-writing organizer was designed to help students integrate the history they learned into a fictional plot. Iran decided to use the courthouse story as the basis for his historical fiction. Iran's pre-writing is shown in Figure 3. As often happens with historical fiction, some details are invented to suit the purposes of the story. In Iran's story, he decided that the murderer should escape rather than be hung.

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Figure 3. Iran's pre-writing.

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Before students began writing the first draft of their historical fiction piece, Mrs. Bagley also modeled drafting (see figure 4). While modeling her rough draft, she integrated a mini-lesson on character development. This mini-lesson focused on showing characters in action and providing physical description of the characters. Mrs. Bagley underlined action verbs, e.g. “brushed off” and “stepped out.” She also underlined examples of physical description, e.g. “freshly ironed suit.” The students spent several days drafting their stories, and Mrs. Bagley conferenced with students. During her conferencing she decided she needed to teach another mini-lesson in which she modeled how to use dialogue to show character development. Another mini-lesson focused on adding a description of the setting. As part of this lesson, Mrs. Bagley showed them how to use sticky notes as a strategy for adding text to a rough draft.

The students met in peer revision groups to read their stories and get feedback. They made revisions in the margins, in the spaces between lines, and on sticky notes (see figure 5). The final stage of the writing process was also modeled by the teacher, with student participation. The students used an editing kit, with colored pens and an editing checklist to guide their work (see figure 6). They used the editing kit with a partner, and then worked with an adult. They recopied their final draft on special paper. Figure 7 shows the first page of Ana’s final draft.

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Figure 4: Mrs. Bagley’s model of rough draft.

Figure 5. Iran’s rough draft, showing additions and editing.

Figure 6. Editing checklist.

Figure 7. Ana’s final draft, page 1.

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**Application of IMSCI with any genre, any grade**

The IMSCI model can be used to guide the teaching of any genre in almost any grade level. For example, with a group of inservice teachers I used the IMSCI model to teach poetry writing. For the inquiry phase, I read aloud examples of free verse poetry (Spooner, 1993; Worth, 1994), we discussed what these poems had in common, and wrote our own definition of poetry. I then modeled for them a way to generate topics for poetry using a listing approach. The teachers contributed to this list as well, which meant that this phase included both modeling and shared writing (both of which should occur for prewriting, as well as drafting and revising). Then, as a group, we decided on a topic we could all relate to and wrote a very rough draft of a poem using a shared writing approach. The teachers offered up phrases and words, and I served both as scribe and co-author of the poem, providing my opinions on how to shape the poem. The teachers were then given the choice of working with a partner, or working alone, to choose a topic and draft their own free verse poem.

We worked to revise our group-authored poem before I asked them to revise their poems. Each step in the process was modeled either by me alone or with them as a shared writing task. Then, each step in the process was completed with a partner, or alone.

We repeated this set of steps with memoir, nonfiction, and persuasive writing. Each time, we began with an inquiry phase where we examined exemplars of the genre and discussed their features before I began modeling. The writing process was modeled, keeping true to its recursive nature. Pre-writing led to drafting, and drafting led to revising, but I returned to our pre-writing or to drafting when the need arose.

Modeling was always followed by or occurred simultaneously with shared writing. Having students participate keeps them engaged, but modeling accompanied by think-aloud helps them to see that the teacher too struggles with word choice, syntax, etc. The words don't just appear—shazam!—on the page. And rough drafts are rough!

Collaborative writing and/or independent writing always follows. Collaboration can precede independent writing for struggling writers, offering them a sheltered context in which to try out their new understanding of how writing happens. Publication can be achieved through a variety of means from the

simplest—students reading aloud their work at various stages of progress—to more elaborate typing and displaying student work.

### **Final thoughts**

Through inquiry, we can build students' background knowledge of genres. Then, through modeling, shared writing, and collaborative writing, we support students as they approximate the expectations and conventions of the chosen genre. By following the instructional model described here, we make our expectations more explicit and overt, which increases the likelihood that students will feel successful as writers of many genres.



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Figure 1. Historic Main Street graphic organizer.

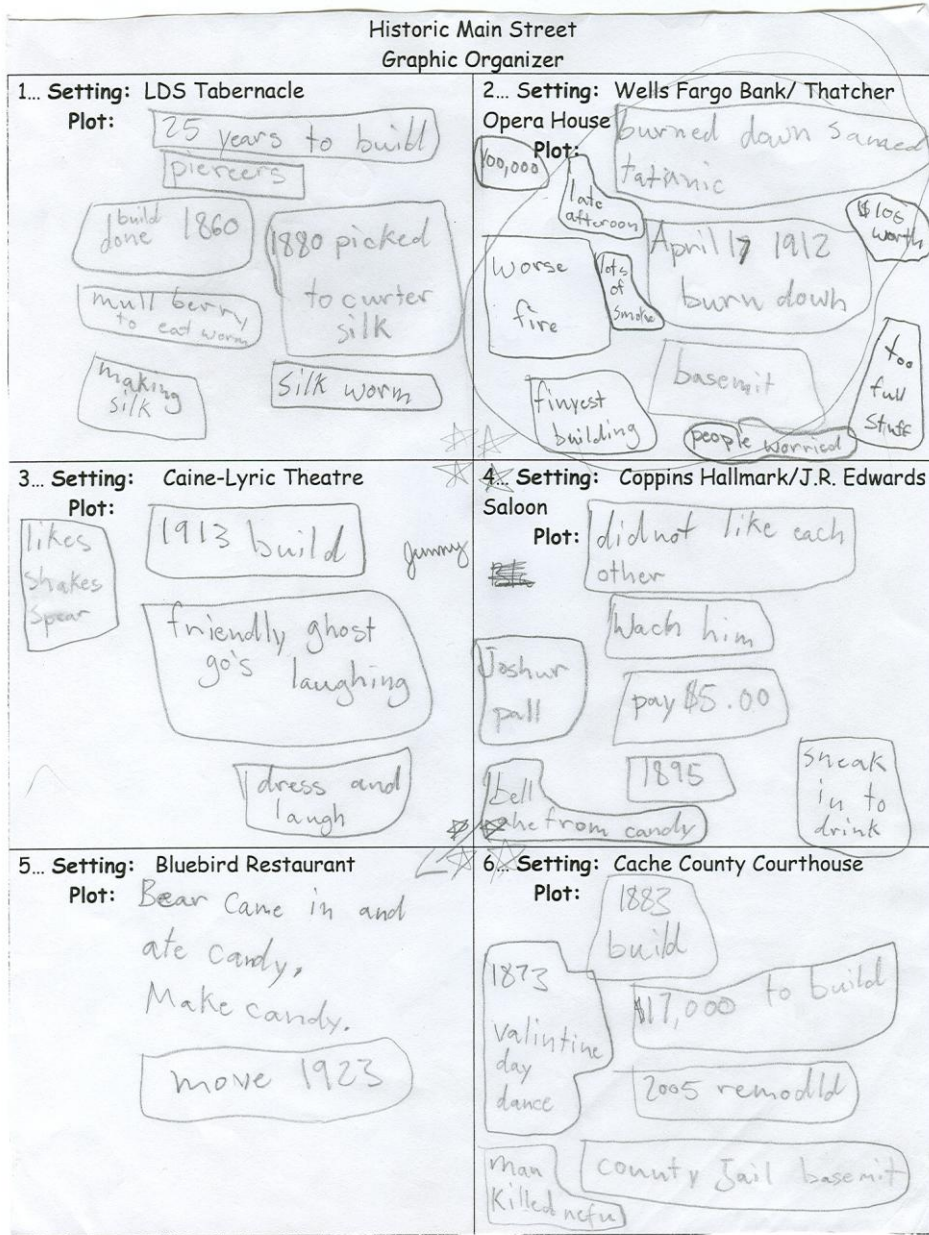



Figure 2. Mrs. Bagley's pre-writing.



Name Mrs. Bagley  
Historical Fiction Pre-Write

<p>Setting:</p> <p style="font-size: 2em; font-weight: bold;">Opera Thatcher House</p> <p>horse race current events</p>	<p>Characters: ① <u>28 year old</u> Who: <u>Christopher Preston Banks</u> What they look like: <u>tall brown hair, blue eyes, slacks, collared shirts, cane</u> What they like: <u>a briefcase, cigar, top hat, cards, U.R. Edwards</u> What they don't like: <u>crying babies, dogs, riding horses, vegetables, opera music</u> Other info: <u>bank = Thatcher bank, married, 2 kids, Laffy Taffy</u></p>
<p>Plot: (The REAL story)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• mystery to who burned it down</li> <li>• worst fire in Logan history</li> <li>• burned down the same day as Titanic</li> <li>• <u>April 17, 1912</u></li> <li>• started in basement in late afternoon</li> <li>• \$100,000 in damage</li> <li>• basement is full of stuff</li> </ul>	<p>How does your MADE UP character affect the plot? What is his/her role?:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chris starts the fire -</li> <li>• Chris hears the opera music every day at work, he hates it.</li> <li>• his plan - turn off all the sound in the basement</li> <li>• he knocks a big pile of papers into the furnace and it starts a fire</li> <li>• he runs away</li> </ul>

Figure 3. Iran's pre-writing.

Name Iran  
Historical Fiction Pre-Write

<p>Setting: Cache county courthouse.</p>	<p>Characters: 20 years old Who: Micke stand</p> <p>What they look like: His eyes are green, his hair is brown. He wears ragi cloths.</p> <p>What they like: He likes cookies and loves riding horses he like dogs.</p> <p>What they don't like: He hates the sheriff, he hates the law, he hates cats.</p> <p>Other info: He is not married. He goes to all valentine dances. He always carries a gun.</p>
<p>Plot: (The REAL story) A guy shot the sheriffs nephew. He went to jail. one day he broke free and noone could find him for 3 days. It was in 1873 the day of the valentine Dance. They hung him outside. Build it in 1883. The county jail was in the basement.</p>	<p>How does your MADE UP character affect the plot? What is his/her role?: He is getting chased and he shot the sheriff's nephew and he went to jail the jail is in the basement but he still escaped.</p>

Is Micke the one who shot the sheriff's nephew? yes

Figure 4: Mrs. Bagley's model of rough draft.

The sun shone through my window on April 17th. ~~I took~~ I sat down for breakfast and read my newspaper as usual. There was a huge article about a boat sinking, the Titanic. I quickly turned the page so I didn't have to look at it anymore. Who cares, I thought? I finished getting ready and headed to work.

I stepped out of my front door and saw many men riding on horses. I brushed off my freshly ironed suit and decided to walk. I did not want any wrinkles in my suit. I walked briskly to work, <sup>I was</sup> careful not to drag my suitcase <sup>briefcase</sup> in the muddy streets.

Still <sup>opera</sup> two blocks away, I could already hear the singing. Oh how I hated the singing. Right above my desk on the third floor was the opera house. Every day, all day, I could hear them practicing. And I couldn't stand it. I hated noise. Especially opera noise. The closer I got to the building, the madder

Figure 5. Iran's rough draft, showing additions and editing.

Iran The Dangerous  
One morning <sup>Man</sup> Mike stand was  
dressing up when he saw  
the news paper. it said that  
in 1873 there was going to  
be a valentine ~~that~~ <sup>nick stan thoyt</sup> ~~that~~ <sup>I'm</sup> ~~that~~ <sup>twent</sup>  
dance was the next day. ~~the next day~~ <sup>The valentine</sup> He knew that  
the sheriff's nephew was in charge  
of this. ~~And he was~~ <sup>walking</sup> So he went to the  
dance. ~~And he was~~  
PP As soon as he got  
there he saw the sheriff's  
nephew but first he raced  
to the dessert table to  
get some cookies. <sup>When he was</sup>  
(<sup>"I love cookies!"</sup> Mike said)

Figure 6. Editing checklist.

Student Initials parent Initials

### Editing Checklist

<input type="checkbox"/> IH	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> VP	Name
<input type="checkbox"/> IH	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> VP	Sentences make sense
<input type="checkbox"/> IH	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> VP	Ending punctuation . ! ?
<input type="checkbox"/> IH	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> VP	Beginning Capitals
<input type="checkbox"/> IH	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> VP	Capitals for names
<input type="checkbox"/> IH	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> VP	Circle possible misspellings
<input type="checkbox"/> IH	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> VP	Title in the center
<input type="checkbox"/> IH	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> VP	Story stays on topic

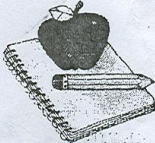
Figure 7. Ana's final draft, page 1.

7

Draft Paper

Initials A.V. Writing Project # 1 D R E

Title The opera Thatcher house Page # 1



Rhanna lived in front of the opera

\* Thatcher House. She saw where the

\* fire started and what time and who

\* did it. She went to the firefighters.

\* The firefighters turned the fire off,

\* but the girl was afraid so she didn't

\* want to call the police. But she had

\* to do it for everyone's good. She ran

\* as fast as she could and said

\* everything she knew. They looked for

\* him then found him. His name was