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Developing Writers: The True Story of Change

Linda Denstaedt, Elizabeth Gifford, Phyllis Ness

"When teachers change the way they think about learning, they change the way they teach."

-David Sousa's revision of Michael Fullan

You may think you understand change, even desire it. But the true story of change is less pretty and more difficult to tell, maybe even less desirable than imagined. This is the story of three teachers who went in search of a better way to teach writing. This is the story of change.

Linda's Story

Sheila began the last paragraph of her reflection with the words, "Basically, I have some regrets" And she echoed the reflection of so many of my students. What did they regret? They were seniors, graduating into a world of economics, law, engineering, and teaching degrees. Few would be English majors, and only two wanted to be writers. All struggled with a transition that is the focus of my classroom—becoming a writer. You see, they spent most of their educational careers dutifully completing assignments created by well-intentioned teachers. They did not understand that becoming a writer means living life with a writer's eyes, finding meaning inside themselves, or making decisions. Instead, they passed their time achieving good grades.

But it is never too late. It wasn't too late for Sheila who also said, "I still am so proud of what I have done, and I keep getting new ideas just by living life." Sheila struggled. She entered my room as an underachiever who wasn't really interested in English and only wished she could write well enough to get an "A." She didn't do her homework, and she never revised. However, she became a writer, designing her own projects, independently studying the genre of her choice, and apprenticing authors she admired. She learned to write authentic dialogue by listening to her friends talk. She wrote and rewrote, not because I scribbled in red in her margins but because she set a revision goal after we talked about her structure or her conflict or her intent. She wrote a screenplay. Then she selected a five-minute scene, which she filmed and digitally edited. Sheila concluded her reflection with these words: "It is interesting how differently I think about my writing now." Sheila became a writer her senior year.

So what do I regret? Less these days because I found two colleagues willing to change. Beth Gifford, Phyllis Ness, and I are making changes in the way we teach writing. We are trying to help students become writers before they hit their senior year. And we are not beginning in eleventh grade, eighth grade, or fifth grade, just in time for the MEAP. We are beginning in kindergarten and first grade.

Beth Gifford and Phyllis Ness teach first grade at Pine Knob Elementary. Together we implement model classrooms and design teacher training to change writing instruction in Clarkston Community Schools. We believe David Sousa's rephrasing of Michael Fullan's words.

As a result, we went in search of a few ideas to propel us into designing quality instruction focused on creating writers. We worked at creating Writing Workshops that function with similar philosophies and instructional strategies, even though my students were seventeen and theirs were six. We talked about the problems we faced and shared the excitement of our students as they grew and changed. We formulated questions that propelled us to stretch the boundaries of what we believed possible. We asked hard questions: Can our students revise through an invention process? Can our students determine line breaks in a poem? Can our students understand author intent?

A Few Simple Beliefs

We discovered that change is difficult. It is even difficult when you want to make change. However, it becomes easier if you articulate your beliefs.

We each asked ourselves: What are the essential beliefs that propel my instructional decisions? We wrote our beliefs on paper, knowing they didn't have to be perfect or permanent. Then we pinned them to our sleeves, or desk, or any place that ensured we would see them regularly. We asked ourselves this question as we reflected on our lessons: Did I behave as if I believed what I wrote on this piece of paper?

We believed

1. oral language precedes writing and helps develop it.
2. students write to make meaning.
3. students have meaning inside them.
4. learning to write means learning to create intent.
5. writing is making decisions.
6. writing gives children power.

As we passed a year together, the results were eye opening. We did not always act as if we believed children had meaning inside them. We didn't always give them choices or honor their choices. We had to stop ourselves from controlling the product as if the product were the point of the learning. We struggled, but we changed.

A Few Good Quotes

We realized that change is impossible without reading current thinking in a field. Selecting even a single book and using it as a personal mentor for the year will make a difference. We learned to read and reread that book because a single reading is never enough when you are really about change.

We read many books, but we continually returned to *The Art of Teaching Writing* by Lucy Calkins and *In the Company of Children* by Joanne Hindley. In our research, we found a few good quotes we returned to again and again. These few quotes helped us make decisions.

What a child can do in cooperation today,
he can do independently tomorrow.

—L.S. Vygotsky

I want to discover what I know that I didn't know I knew, to see a familiar subject in an unfamiliar way, to contradict my most certain beliefs, to burst through expectation and intent to insight and clarity, to hurt and laugh and understand and be confused in a way that I have not experienced before.

—Donald Murray

When writing is thought of as a process of dialogue between the writer and the emerging text, it means that we shift from being writers to being readers of our own drafts.

—Lucy Calkins

We find the seeds of everyday poetry in their natural everyday voices.

—Georgia Heard

We Have So Much in Common

What Beth and Phyllis and I found talking about my seniors and their first graders was not surprising—we had a sense of its essential truth

before we began. We found that the product is not the goal. We are not about ensuring the “good” five-paragraph essay or personal narrative or poem. As a matter of fact, we are not about writing the five-paragraph essay at all. We are not about ensuring passing scores on the MEAP.

We believe in the power and simplicity of poetry. Learning to write a poem gives students skills that translate to any genre. First graders or twelfth graders who learn that their everyday voices are poetry begin to hear poems as they romp on the playground or sit at a traffic light. They understand the concept of “good” words and author intent. They make decisions and go in search of decisions made by other authors. Other teachers said, “Poetry is too hard.” Or “Poetry is an extra.” Or “Little kids can't write poems; they need to write stories.” They were wrong. We found poets write wonderful stories and exceptional personal essays. We found emphasis on thinking and decision-making is important, no matter what genre a student chooses or must demonstrate.

We know better what good teaching is all about. We are about creating writers who see they have something worth saying. We are about creating classrooms in which students make decisions and take control of their work. We are about creating readers who admire and apprentice the writing of other writers, published and peer. We are about helping children see the world as rich with words.

Beth's Story

He walked into my first-grade classroom on the first day of school. The room was bustling with parents and students greeting their friends after a summer's absence. His eyes focused on the floor as he concentrated on holding back nervous tears. He silently walked over to an empty chair and held his head down as I welcomed him and encouraged him to draw a picture. He grabbed a crayon and curled his four fingers around it while drawing a circle with lines to represent himself.

I thought of Lucy Calkins, “How easy it is to see what children cannot do rather than what they *can* do.” I could choose to groan about how Joey couldn't even hold the crayon correctly, how immature his drawing was, his lack of confidence, or how extremely shy he was. How could he ever write words—let alone poems—when he didn't even know the alphabet! Or I could choose to see Joey as a beautiful bud waiting for the rain and the sun to enable him to blossom. I chose the latter because I knew that Joey, as all my first graders, just needed to be showered with lots of time to write, as well as lessons on what writers do and a non-threatening environment that shines with praise and promotes risk-taking.

A couple of years ago, I might have thought that the year ahead would be filled with lots of lessons to teach Joey to write. I would be the one to decide Joey's course of writing growth as I "highly encouraged" listening for that beginning sound to write rather than allowing Joey to choose his own journey beginning with pictures. Now Lucy Calkins' quote guides me during the year. "Teaching writing is a matter of faith. We demonstrate that faith when we listen well, when we refer to our students as writers, when we expect them to love writing and to pour heart and soul into it." It is by faith that I look at each student on that first day of school and know that they will see themselves as writers this year. Since I truly believe that first graders can be taught to write beautiful metaphors and similes, my job is to open their eyes to the world around them.

Listening Well

As we journey along, my job is to be a good listener as well as to teach my students to be good listeners for each other. When students know that there is someone who really cares about what they have to say, they feel empowered. The work of Lucy Calkins reminds me of that; she states: "When we help children know that their lives do matter, we are teaching writing." So we work on oral language first, the speaking and listening. We talk, and we realize that we all hold many memories and experiences that are bursting to be told. We listen because we truly want to understand. Even though Joey only listens, he is listening with his eyes, ears, and heart. And we treasure each other's ideas and words.

Students as Writers

I refer to Joey and the rest of my students as writers like Tomie DePaola and Patricia Polacco right from the beginning of the year. As we read Tom by Tomie DePaola, we laugh and discover that we are writers like Tomie DePaola when we write about our memories. When we read *Friends* by Helme Heine, we discuss our friends and realize we are writers when we write about fun times with friends. Joey draws a stick figure of his brother playing hockey. Unlike two years ago, I do not require letters or words. When I sit down to listen to Joey, he tells me all about an evening when he watched his older brother's hockey game. Joey describes a wonderful story full of details and emotions. He is proud of his work, and I tell him he wrote a special memory just like Tomie DePaola did. And sometimes I tell Joey and the rest of my students that Tomie DePaola is a writer like them!

To Love to Write

In the beginning of the year, Joey didn't enjoy drawing, let alone writing words. Excited and proud, I share my journal writing with him and my

students. Each day we celebrate writing whether it is a picture, a letter, or a word. We cheer each other on and beam when a passerby stops to tell us about our great writing displayed in the hallway. I make sure students hear a myriad of praise for their efforts as we support one another.

In the dead of winter, when we thought the world was lifeless, the writers were blooming in my first-grade classroom. When Joey wrote this poem, I knew he had bloomed.

Ice

Ice is cold.

It looks like water.

It looks like pointy needles.

Ice.

Joey no longer draws circles and lines representing people or holds his face down to avoid talking to someone. Joey writes with confidence and begs to share his writing with the class. By the end of the year, he has written an entire book about his observations of birds. One page is about cardinals:

The cardinal, it looks red and shiny.

I saw the cardinal under a green tree by my house.

This time Joey wrote the words first and then drew the illustrations. However, more important than the words and detailed picture is the confidence Joey now possesses. He has found a need and a desire to write. He is looking at the world through the eyes of a writer because along the way he discovered he is a writer.

Phyllis' Story

Walking into the portable building that houses my classroom one morning, I notice a heron fly overhead and land on the playground. I am thrilled when I see that he is still there when the children arrive. Of course, I point him out to the boys and girls as they enter the classroom. Some watch him with interest, while others have important news to share with their friends. During writing time, Tayler returns to the window and watches the heron. Within minutes she has composed a poem, beginning, "His long-necked body hunts for food." These are words that come easily to a child who has learned to see the world as a writer.

I have always been a person who would notice the heron, but I have not always been a teacher who would make sure children saw the heron, let alone the world, with the eyes of a writer. My work with Linda and Beth has changed the way I see my students and the way I teach. Through our Writer's Workshop approach, we are creating writers—little children who can't wait for that special time in the day when they can express themselves through their pictures and words.

Beginning with Memories

The great playwright, Tennessee Williams, once wrote, "Life is all memory except for passing moments," and I believe he is right. I believe that if I can teach a young child how to see the world as a writer does and to savor the details of his life with words, then I can teach that child to live a life full of memories and not just passing moments.

Thus, I begin each year with a unit that focuses on writing memories. I introduce the unit with a book, an essential tool in my classroom and one I often use to deliver the curriculum effectively. On the first day, I read *The Big, Big, Sea* by Martin Waddell, a beautifully illustrated book that captures the essence of my first lesson, the importance of saving special moments and events in our lives with words. I share a summer experience that I have had with my own family, and I show the children one of my most important possessions, my writer's notebook. I read them one of the entries I have written about our trip. The children see that I treasure my journal. I hold it affectionately and tell them how important it is for me to be able to save my memories here.

An Essential Tool - The Writer's Notebook

I then present each child with a writer's notebook of her or his own. I tell the children how lucky they are, for they will be able to record all of their first-grade experiences in this special place. I share my regret at never having had a writer's notebook when I was a child. I tell them how lucky they are that they will be able to write daily about the special things that happen in their lives! At the end of the day, every child carefully packs this treasure in his backpack, taking it home to personalize and decorate in her or his own special way. Of course, the children do not realize that this notebook will be a key to their literacy development. They will learn to read and write as they become writers, and I will have a tool that will help me assess their development and plan for their growth throughout the year.

Seeing the World With the Eyes of a Writer

In the days and weeks that follow, we begin to learn what it means to see the world as a writer. We take walks outside and through the school to learn to use our senses. We feel the rocks on the playground, smell lunch cooking in the cafeteria, hear the voices of children in their classrooms, see the autumn leaves change color, and taste a bitter lemon. We carry along our writer's notebooks, and the children draw pictures to help them remember the experience. We talk about what we are seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, and tasting because the development of oral language and a rich vocabulary is critical to their growth as writers. I know

that if the children can draw and talk with details, I will someday see these details through their words, as well.

Learning about Craft through Literature

Each day I share quality literature with the children. I choose books that are written from memories; books by authors such as Tomie DePaola and Patricia Polacco. We talk about how these authors have captured the important memories in their lives, and we learn about the craft that the writer and illustrator have used. We notice the use of interesting words, the ability to see pictures painted with words in our heads, and the uniqueness of the artist's illustrations.

Celebrations of Writing Every Day

I invite the children to draw and write about special moments in their lives. I let the child choose the event or the day because only he knows the significance of the memory. The children begin to see the connection between the memorable events in their lives and the purpose of writing at school. As they are working, I circulate around the room and talk to each child about his or her work. Our conversations provide insight into his life. It helps me build the trusting relationship that will be imperative if the child is to have success and a desire to write. As I celebrate each child's writing with her, she begins to see herself as a writer. As Lauren packs her notebook in her backpack each night, then rushes in each morning to me tell she has written about her sister, her soccer game, or the caterpillars in her backyard, I know this is a child who now looks at the world differently. At the end of the year, when she publishes *In Tennessee: A Diary of My Adventures in Tennessee*, I am convinced that Lauren is a writer. She is a young author whose life will be full of memories and not just passing moments.

About the Authors

Linda Denstaedt, author and teacher, facilitates a Communications Arts Center and serves as Director of Writing, developing students and teachers for Clarkston schools. A presenter at MCTE and NCTE, her most current book, *The Creative Writer's Craft* was published last fall by NCTE.

Phyllis Ness and Elizabeth Gifford are first-grade teachers at Pine Knob Elementary in Clarkston, MI. Their students work daily in a Writer's Workshop and have participated, for the past two years, in the River of Words Poetry Contest. With another colleague, Phyllis and Elizabeth have presented at the MRA conference. They work with Linda Denstaedt as Writing Trainers in their district.