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Success at last : one teacher's growth in understanding of writer's workshop

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Success at last : one teacher's growth in understanding of writer's workshop

Abstract

Writer's workshop is an approach to teaching writing that corresponds to the whole language philosophy. Much of the literature published on the topic of whole language, and specifically writer's workshop, describes the ideal classroom environment. However, "whole language in the intermediate classroom is often given less attention in professional books and journals than the primary classroom receives" (Gannon-Smith, 1991). As a reading and language arts teacher of sixth grade students, I have been interested in teaching writing through the use of writer's workshop. There are some general whole language themes which can be used to build a motivating writing environment for intermediate grades.

SUCCESS AT LAST: ONE TEACHER'S GROWTH
IN UNDERSTANDING OF WRITER'S WORKSHOP

A Graduate Journal Article Paper
Submitted to the
Division of Reading and Language Arts
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Masters of Arts in Education
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by

Cindy L. Davis

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Much of the literature published on the topic of whole language, and specifically writer's workshop, describes the ideal classroom environment. However, "whole language in the intermediate classroom is often given less attention in professional books and journals than the primary classroom receives" (Gannon-Smith, 1991). As a reading and language arts teacher of sixth grade students, I have been interested in teaching writing through the use of writer's workshop. I have found only a few sources which specifically address the methods and materials I will find most useful as I develop my classroom routines.

There are some general whole language themes which can be used to build a motivating writing environment for intermediate grades. Whole language is based on the following ideas: "a.) language is for making meanings, for accomplishing purposes; b.) written language is language-thus what is true for language in general is true for written language; c.) the cuing systems of language (phonology in oral, orthography in written language, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics) are always simultaneously present and interacting in any instance of language in use; d.) language use always occurs in a situation; e.) situations are critical to meaning-making" (Altwerger, Edelsky, & Flores, 1987).

Writer's workshop is an approach to teaching writing that corresponds to the whole language philosophy. In order to make writer's workshop as motivating as possible, Oldfather & Dahl (1994) have called for a "reconceptualization of motivation that centers on the learner as agent in the social construction of meaning." They have identified three "co-occurring" domains of the intrinsic motivation for literacy learning. These three domains are: the Domain of Classroom Culture, the Interpersonal Domain, and the Intrapersonal Domain.

The Classroom Culture

The environment, or culture, of a classroom sends a message to the students and others as to how the teacher perceives language/literacy learning and how the teacher perceives his/her role in its acquisition. Ideally, for a classroom grounded in whole language philosophy, it will consist of the following general components:

- The teacher provides a "deep responsiveness to students' oral, written, and artistic self-expression" (Oldfather, 1993).
- The authority and responsibility is shared between the teacher and students (Bartlett, 1994).
- The lessons and activities come out of a meaning-centered curriculum (Oldfather & Dahl, 1994).
- The learners are not only allowed, but encouraged, to make choices (Gannon-Smith, 1991; Farnan, Lapp, & Flood, 1992).
- The classroom is a print-rich environment (Graves, 1994).
- There is a high level of structure and routine with clear expectations established from the start (Bartlett, 1994; Routman, 1991).
- The writing process is emphasized over product. However, the process is recognized as being recursive and abstract (Farnan, et al., 1992). It is not simplified to the point of being a recipe (Kucera, 1995).

The above characteristics appear to be necessary for the success of writer's workshop, but these are not the only factors to consider when attempting to motivate students to write.

The Interpersonal Domain

The interpersonal relationships developed in writer's workshop, such as in peer conferences, shared reading, and student/teacher conferences, can affect a learner's motivation to write. These peer and student/teacher relationships can serve to motivate writing for real audiences. They can also provide a strong support network as the writer moves recursively through the writing process.

Students learn through discovery and by creating personal meaning and then by expressing personal responses to others which allows opportunities for feedback (Oldfather & Dahl, 1994; Farnan, et al., 1992). As students exchange ideas with each other and with the teacher some of the feedback can come in the form of scaffolding.

That is, the teacher and students can provide each other with background knowledge and learn from each other (Bartlett, 1994). In this type of environment, the teacher functions both as facilitator and as learner (Oldfather & Dahl, 1994). To function as a learner, Graves (1996) stresses that the teacher must write with the students. As these relationships between students and the teacher develop, a collaborative community is formed (Bartlett, 1994). This collaboration can take many forms, such as conference groups, discussion groups, and peer revision/editing.

Although relationships developed within the context of learning are very important, so is the development of the learner's self-perception. This perception can determine to what extent the learner is motivated to write.

The Intrapersonal Domain

Oldfather and Dahl (1994) explain that how one perceives one's self as a writer (or learner) can have a direct affect on how motivated one is to write. If students are encouraged to write for real reasons and real audiences, they will begin to see purposes for writing and see themselves as capable communicators (Gannon Smith, 1991).

Oldfather and Dahl (1994) further state that when students are allowed to make choices in their learning they realize that they have a voice. Graves (1994) defines voice as "the imprint of ourselves on our writing." He goes on to reinforce the importance of developing voice by stating that "voice is the engine that sustains writers through the hard work of drafting and redrafting."

When a community of learners is established and this writer's voice is developed, learners will see that what they have to say is not only important, but is also valued therefore enhancing the writer's sense-of-self (Oldfather & Dahl, 1994).

One Teacher's Story

I have been teaching for eight years in an upper elementary, departmentalized setting. I teach Reading/Language Arts to sixth graders in eighty minute blocks of time. I am responsible for teaching reading, writing, handwriting, and spelling. For several years now, I have been trying to use some form of writer's workshop in my classroom, but I have not been very successful. I have found it difficult to keep students motivated to write over a sustained period of time. I have also struggled with teaching the skills, and perhaps more importantly, with documenting what skills I have taught since writer's workshop is so individualized. Since my setting is departmentalized, I also have an added issue of TIME. I have had trouble in the past with allowing a regular and consistent time for writing. My administrator is supportive in my efforts to teach more holistically, but my setting does not easily allow me to integrate writing with other areas of the curriculum, so I am forced to create my own design of writer's workshop.

I have chosen to narrow my focus to the changes I have had to make as the teacher in a writer's workshop classroom. The first thing I realized that I needed to do was to establish my classroom routines to motivate sixth graders to write in a writer's workshop within a departmentalized setting. I considered the three domains of intrinsic motivation for literacy learning as I structured my classroom environment and activities. I attempted to create a motivating writing program based on whole language philosophy for the specific use in a sixth grade departmentalized classroom.

I begin my day by reading to the students. Although they are sixth graders, they still enjoy being read to. Then, my students silently read a book of their choice for fifteen minutes. When silent reading time is up, writer's workshop begins. It lasts for 20-25 minutes. During this time students work out of their folder which has a pocket for each of the following: Ideas, First Drafts, Revisions, and Final Drafts. The writing projects are chosen by the students and are primarily individual works. Occasionally

students work together on a project, but I have found that when students work alone, they create much more personally meaningful pieces. In addition to writing, students may also be found conferencing with peers to revise and edit their rough drafts. I have instructed my students that a final draft is to be a piece of writing that is as good as they can possibly get it through revising and editing on their own and with peers. The only time I will edit with a student is when a final draft has been completed and they wish to publish it.

I used to think that it was my role as the teacher to revise and proofread with each student on each one of their pieces, but after reading A Fresh Look at Writing by Donald Graves (1994), I realized that there is a difference between a final draft and a published draft. Hurrah!! Now I am free to conference with students daily and find out what they are working on, what their interests are, and how I can best help them accomplish what they want to accomplish. I feel like I know my students better, and when I do edit with them, they can focus on learning from unrecognized errors rather than watch me correct errors they could have corrected themselves or correct errors that they are not ready to correct.

After workshop, my students put their folders away and I begin a whole group lesson followed by work time. This forty minute period is devoted to direct instruction of various reading and writing skills. I teach these skills mainly through my basal series which has an anthology as a text and the teacher's manual details many skills that may be taught through the literature. Because all students learn differently, I feel that it is important to have both student self-directed and teacher-directed learning experiences, and I enjoy the freedom to choose the skills in the teacher's manual which best suit my students' needs.

On Friday, the daily routine changes slightly. We begin with a spelling test, followed by writer's workshop. Then we take 15-20 minutes to have "Author's Chair."

This is a time when students may share their writing. They have all week to sign up and may share a piece that is in progress in order to get feedback and comments from peers, or they may share a published piece.

In the past I never felt that I had time for students to share their work, but by building it into the weekly routine, students are able to hear what others are doing in workshop. This has led to interesting discussions and to students being sparked into new directions with their own writing projects. For example, I had some students who decided to make an alphabet book of famous Americans. They included many facts in their biographies and one particularly artistic student illustrated each entry. When this group shared their final product, several students decided to do biographies of other famous people, and this led to still others who chose to develop trivia games about famous people and events. After author's chair, we follow with the whole group lesson and work time as usual.

I have a chart posted that lists the schedule of classroom activities and the corresponding times. At the beginning of the year, I prompted students when an activity was over and the next was to begin, but now I do not even have to do that. I have designated students who are responsible for passing out the writing folders and picking them back up. The students are able to make the transitions between activities smoothly and quickly. It is this structure and certainty that makes the element of writer's workshop a comfortable part of the daily schedule. The students know what is expected of them, how long workshop will last, and what materials are needed.

Materials:

Dr. Jeanne Harms, a professor at the University of Northern Iowa, teaches her students how to make a writing folder with four pockets using butcher paper. I was fortunate enough to be one of Dr. Harms's students and have taught my sixth grade students how to make this writing folder. In finished form they are quite large and hold

many pieces of writing of various sizes. This writing folder houses all of the students' works in progress and final drafts and is the only material required for writer's workshop. The folders are kept in the room and are passed out at the beginning of workshop and collected at the end. If a student plans to work on a piece outside of class, he/she simply takes that piece and leaves the folder in class. This way students always have something to work on in workshop. There is no such thing as, "I forgot my story at home." My response is, "Get another one of your projects out and go to work."

My classroom materials include a wide selection of reading materials, author files, picture files, and boxes of interesting objects--all of which serve to stimulate young authors. Among the selection of reading materials, many are authored by the students themselves. These pieces are some of the most popular ones.

I have a bookcase which holds various publishing materials such as paper of varying sizes, colors and thicknesses, markers, colored pencils, crayons, and chalks, staplers (regular and long-arm), a three-hole punch, scissors, wrapping paper, yarn, wallpaper, etc. These materials are used when students publish their work.

I also have a bookmaking center. Early in the year, over the course of two or three days, I teach the whole class how to make a hard cover book with sewn pages. Directions for making such books can be found in Literacy and Expressive Activity (Harms & Lettow, 1992). Then, as students publish their work, they may choose to make their own book. Many students choose to word process their published pieces on one of the three classroom computers or on their personal home computers.

My students are also free to visit the school's library at their leisure to get research materials that may be necessary for their project. Our librarian assists students in their search and runs internet searches with them if applicable.

The Journey:

When I began teaching, I fully expected to be able to include writer's workshop in my daily classroom routine. I did so, but after a few weeks the enthusiasm would fizzle--mine and the students'. I knew there was a missing link. I tried giving students complete freedom of choice. I tried assigning writing topics. I tried having workshop only two or three times a week. Nothing kept the excitement alive. That was because all along I never really understood the writing process or my role as teacher within it.

I have come to realize that the writing process is not a series of steps moved through mechanically. It is more abstract than that. Not all writer's start in the same place and the process can be different from piece to piece. Some students start out writing the first draft without a lot of prior planning--They tell me they want to let the story tell itself and that they aren't sure what they want to happen. Other students need to map out a story before ever beginning to write. While still others must draw the characters and setting and talk about their ideas before they begin to write.

Once a piece is written, I have learned that it may be done. It may never become a final draft or a published piece. It doesn't have to be torn apart and corrected by me. It may have already served its purpose to the student. I have learned to let the students choose which pieces they will finish. I do, however, take the last two weeks of each quarter and designate that "final draft time." During these two weeks during writer's workshop, students do not begin any new pieces. They concentrate solely on finishing projects, conferencing with peers, or publishing pieces edited by me. At the end of "final draft time" students select their most prized pieces to be placed in their portfolio. A running list of titles is kept on the front of the portfolio and dates of their selection are noted.

This portfolio has served as a chronicle of each student's growth as a writer--or in some cases, lack of growth. In the case where a student hasn't written much, it

becomes very apparent to the student that he/she is not accomplishing much as a writer. The portfolio speaks for itself; I have to say very little.

Success At Last:

For the first time, I feel satisfied that writer's workshop is a valuable part of my daily routine. I feel that the structure I developed in the very beginning of the year has served to keep the workshop running smoothly. Since I am no longer trapped at the editing table revising everything the students write, I am free to talk to each student about what they are writing and why they have chosen that. The noise level of my classroom during writer's workshop is dramatically different.

I used to think that since students need to talk as they write, workshop would be a noisy place. Not anymore. I have never told the students not to talk, since I am able to see who needs extra support or maybe just a jump-start I catch a lot of the off-task conversation before it starts. I also find that I can join in on or just observe on-task discussions among my students.

In addition to spending time with individual students, I now have time to write for my own enjoyment. I am constantly amazed by how important my modeling of writing is. While I am writing, I will look around and see my students busily working on their own pieces. Occasionally, a student will come over to see how my piece is coming along. They offer me suggestions and comments just as I do for them. It is very gratifying to be a part of a rich writing environment --I believe that must be how my students feel also.

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A The Reading Teacher

The Reading Teacher (RT) is a peer-reviewed, refereed journal published eight times each year by the International Reading Association. *RT* is an open forum for the thoughtful consideration of practices, issues, and trends within the field of reading and literacy education. Submissions focusing on children's literature or the relationships between literacy and other subject areas are also welcomed. *The Reading Teacher* serves classroom teachers, reading teachers, administrators, supervisors, consultants, college/university faculty, parents, and others who are committed to improving literacy instruction for children through age 12. It is received by approximately 65,000 individuals and institutions each month.

Editorial policies and procedures are based on the philosophy of inclusion. The editors intend to enhance *RT's* status as the premiere professional journal for literacy practitioners by increasing its access to professionals at all levels and by extending its appeal to and usefulness for a broad range of professionals interested in children's literacy learning. Five specific goals form the foundation for editorial policies and procedures:

- to provide balanced and in-depth treatment of current and enduring trends and issues that inform classroom practice;
- to encourage consideration of literacy issues within the larger context of education and society;
- to inform readers of findings and implications of recent research in literacy;
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- to ensure a fair, formative, and professional review of all manuscripts.

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More than 75% of IRA individual members receiving *RT* are teachers, reading teachers/specialists, or administrators; 10% are college faculty. Most subscribers are experienced professionals. *RT* is sent to 65,000 members - including 16,000 libraries and institutions - in 100 countries, although most members reside in the United States and Canada.

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The Reading Teacher

Directions for Authors

Methodology should be reported in a concise manner, with strong emphasis placed on the applications and implications of the research findings.

Shorter manuscripts will also be considered for publication. They may take the following forms:

- **Instructional Ideas:** Descriptions of innovative teaching strategies, ideas, or techniques are published in the "Teaching Reading" section of *RT*. Both the goals of these activities and the description of their implementation should be clear. Graphic material (e.g., diagram or photo) that enhances readers' understanding may accompany the manuscript; references are not required. These submissions should generally not exceed five pages.

- **Literacy Stories:** Brief, poignant, insightful, or humorous descriptions of literacy learning or literacy events in children's lives in or out of school are published in *RT*. These are written by adults and should not exceed two pages.

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- **Letters:** To promote dialogue among *RT* readers, authors, and IRA members, letters to the editors that comment specifically on articles or issues addressed in the journal are encouraged. When letters are critical of works published in *RT*, authors of those works will be provided an opportunity to respond within the same issues in which the letters are published. Letters should generally not exceed two pages.

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- quotations, references cited in the text, and the reference list; and
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No abstracts are required for *RT* submissions.

How to submit a manuscript

The editorial team welcomes manuscripts from a broad range of literacy professionals. The following information describes the submission

submit single copies of all materials. All copies must be dark and clear. The author should retain the original manuscript, as submitted copies will not be returned. Likewise, the author should retain original figures and photographs; these will be requested later if the paper has been accepted for publication. Signed, dated permissions (if necessary) should include a statement by the photographer, artist, or child and guardian giving permission to publish the work in *RT*. Likewise, obtaining permission to quote previously published material is the author's responsibility.

Mail all submissions to Editors, *The Reading Teacher*, 414 White Hall, College of Education, Kent State University, Kent, OH 44242, USA. Authors will receive notification of manuscript receipt within two weeks.

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Articles submitted to *RT* are reviewed anonymously by three members of the editorial advisory board or occasionally by guest reviewers. Other submissions are reviewed by members of the editorial team and may be reviewed by editorial advisors. Authors are generally notified of decisions about publication within three months. Substantive feedback on articles will be shared with authors regardless of publication decision.

Articles submitted by IRA committees, affiliates, or special interest groups are subject to the standard review process. For subsequent publication, the individuals who produced the manuscript are listed as the authors, and it is noted that the article resulted from group action during specified years.

Manuscripts are judged for their usefulness to *RT* readers, potential significance and contribution to the field, and quality of writing. Manuscript selection also depends on the editors' date-

Types of submissions

The editors will consider a variety of materials for publication in *RT*. Articles, essays, and reports of different types are appropriate submissions.

These should generally not exceed 20 single-sided, double-spaced pages. They should deal with literacy among children in the preschool through preteen years. Articles may

- describe literacy programs or instructional practices that are based on practical experience, theory, and research;

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- report research of all types related to literacy education programs and practices;

- provide thoughtful commentaries on or analyses of issues related to literacy practices or instruction;

- profile or report interviews of literacy professionals or authors or illustrators of children's books. Timely and interesting interview questions should foster lively responses from the person being interviewed. Interviews should generally not exceed 10 pages and must be accompanied by a letter from the person interviewed granting permission for *RT* to publish the interview.

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Articles should have a clear purpose that is addressed in some depth. Authors must demonstrate how their work relates to or extends previous work on the topic. Figures, tables, illustrations, or photographs are acceptable to the extent that they enhance readers' understanding or appreciation of the article.

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poignant, insightful, or humorous descriptions of literacy learning or literacy events in children's lives in or out of school are published in *RT*. These are written by adults and should not exceed two pages.

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