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The Perfect Storm: How We Became A Writing School

BY JACQUELINE FRY

A storm has been brewing at our primary school. This electrical charge was ignited by Katie Wood Ray, who shared insights from her book *What You Know by Heart* (2002) at the Michigan Reading Conference. Like others in the audience, I was mesmerized. She spoke to us as intelligent, high-quality teachers yearning to raise the level of our students' abilities, but who may have become unsure of ourselves in the face of Adequate Yearly Progress and mandated programs. She told us to "read like writers"—so simple yet so profound. She taught us to immerse our students in rich writing of all kinds—from children's classics to articles from *Sports Illustrated*—and that by teaching our students to study the craft of writing, we could transform them from students who write to writers. My colleagues and I left that final session of the conference inspired, having taken the first step on a journey we did not realize we had just begun.

Fast-forward to mid-January, a few months ago, during a writing workshop in one of the second-grade classrooms in which I am a Title 1 teacher. One of the students flatly stated, "I don't have anything to write about." After we talked for a while, he landed on a small moment to focus on, and away he went. While I related that story to my colleagues, I suddenly realized that it was the first time all year I heard a student make a statement along those lines. The fact that I work on writing with 125 second graders every week made it remarkable.

Our principal recently shared a story about a chat she had with one of our kindergarteners. Lea ran to her that morning bursting with the news. She had just seen a car do a complete spin on the icy road on the way to school! After hearing all of the exciting details, our principal replied, "Wow! That sounds like something you could write about during your writing workshop today."

Without missing a beat, Lea patiently explained, "Oh, I'm already planning to write about my hamster today." How extraordinary for a 5-year-old to have already been thinking and planning for writing workshop!

Except it isn't extraordinary in our school. In every class at every grade level, our students see themselves as writers—people who have meaningful stories to tell. And they don't need anybody to direct them to their topics. They feel empowered to

select their own topics and have learned strategies for turning their ideas into stories. Not long ago, students in every class needed cajoling to get something—anything—down on paper. But our building has transformed into a writing school. Now our students see themselves as writers, not just as kids who write. They have become observers of their lives and can mine their experiences for the small moments that make great stories. The quality of their writing has improved because their motivation to write is so high. They are learning how to look at their lives, connect with a feeling, and write the story.

Our Journey

Recently, my principal asked me to participate in a neighboring school district's Teacher Reading Academy. Our two districts are similar, with comparable percentages of at-risk students. In one of the modules, participants looked at student writing and scored it for ideas on an analytic rubric. We provided a random selection of samples from our second-grade students' writing folders. Their responses overwhelmed me. "Are you sure these aren't fourth- or fifth-grade samples? Listen to the voice in this piece! It's hilarious! Are you sure you didn't just pick out your top writers?" Over and over I heard how they could "never get their kids to write like this." When we discussed their students' writing, I recognized the typical effort we could expect from our own students a couple of years ago before they became *writers*. It

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when I was snow boarding with my friends. Nick and Jasin I had to wate for three minutes! nick only took 1 minute! to get dresse I where are rety dresed and goi g to the top of the Hill with my red snow bord then I got to the top of the hill and sed bom sholocu sholocu! Aad I crused down the hill and hit a tra I landid in a sofft snow banck we all lau shed a lot. and a lot

herwe we go ugen! the nest time I felt rely funny in the snow band! and at the top of the hill! I had the gosbumPS! and nick had the gosbumPS to.

Second-grading writing sample 1.

when I was snow boarding with my friends. Nick and Jasin I had to wate for three minutes! nick only took 1 minute! to get dressed I where are rety dresed and going to the top of the Hill with my red snow bord then I got to the top of the hill and sed bom sholocu sholocu! And I crused down the hill and hit a tree. I landid in a sofft snow banck we all lau shed a lot. and a lot. herwe we go ugen! the nest time I felt rely funny in the snow band! and at the top of the hill! I had the gosbumPS! and nick had the gosbumPS to.

was fine, really, but something was missing. The teachers wanted to know, "How did you get second graders to write like this?" (See writing samples 1 (above) and 2 (p. 42).

A good question. "Magic" isn't really the answer, although it sometimes feels that way. It began with questioning what we were doing. Over the past several years, most of us questioned how we taught writing. Was there a "right" way? Everyone was familiar with the traditional steps in the writing process (brainstorm, draft, revise, edit, and publish) and used them to varying degrees. We were teaching writing, but writing often felt random (write about whatever you want) or contrived (write about your best friend). There was growing dissatisfaction with the products that resulted. We did not share a common language or a way to teach our students the strategies they needed to be able to write when given a prompt such as, "Write whatever you like," or "Write about your best friend." We needed a fresh look.

We are fortunate that our principal is knowledgeable about current best practices in writing instruction. In April of 2005, she purchased copies of *6+1 Traits of Writing: The Complete Guide for the Primary Grades* (Culham, 2005) for the staff, hoping to prompt a larger discussion about writing assessment and instruction. In this book, Ruth Culham and Vicki Spandel define the traits of good writing: ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions, and presentation. When Spandel addressed teachers at a workshop I attended in Gaylord, MI (August, 2006), she said that their goal is to help teachers

discover what all good writing has in common ... and teach those traits to our students. Scoring writing doesn't have to be a mystery or a secret ... we need to get the rubrics out in the open so our students can spot a three or a five a mile away.

Their work gave our teachers the tools to teach our students how to look at their own writing critically.

Plain and simple, the traits support assessing and teaching writing, but they aren't an end in themselves. Teaching students the traits means embracing the writing process and learning how to weave the traits of good writing into that process. The trait model empowers young students to think like writers, talk like writers, and write like writers because it gives them the language to do so (Culham, 2005). We've also learned that taking time for writing daily is crucial—"there is no Miracle-Gro for growing young writers. There are no shortcuts when it comes to learning how to write." (Fletcher & Portalupi, 1998, p. 7)

The second-grade teachers experimented right away with giving their students a language to evaluate traits in their own writing. Students learned to recognize ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and presentation. Teachers agreed to continue using the language of the traits in their classrooms the following school year, but their efforts felt disjointed. Student writing was improving, but something was still missing. Our continuing conversation centered on how we could make it all fit together better.

Meanwhile, our first-grade teachers left school for the summer of 2005 with Lucy Calkins' *Units of Study for Primary Writing: A Yearlong Curriculum* (2003)—another gift from our knowledgeable principal. The storm began to stir. They devoured it and came back to school excited to teach writing in a new way. They loved the framework of a workshop, which includes a mini-lesson, sustained time to write, teacher and peer conferring, and an after-the-workshop share. It elevated the level of writing workshops, helping to "establish ... structures ... by giving very practical, nitty-gritty advice for room arrangements, materials, expectations, and the like" (p. 4).

Over that school year, the results spoke for themselves. Teachers noticed that the first-grade writing had become the best in the building. The kindergarten and second-grade teachers asked, "What's going on in first grade?" and the first-grade teachers were all too happy to share. They learned from Calkins (2003) that teaching writing is teaching *writers*. It's not about the teacher directing the product; it's about honoring the writer, no matter how small. When we

realized that we wanted the entire school to take this direction, the storm increased its fury. Kindergarten teachers adopted the methods of Lucy Calkins for the next year. Second-grade teachers decided to use the structure provided by Calkins' workshop format and the content and evaluation framework of the 6+1 traits of writing.

Reading Calkins's books feels like sitting down to talk with a wonderful mentor teacher. She seems to know your strengths and just what you need to do to improve your current level of teaching. She taught us the importance of calling our students "writers" when we address them during writing workshop. This seems so small on the surface, yet it was born from a shift in our perceptions and expectations of our students. This tiny change from "class," "boys and girls," or "students" to "writers" has in itself created an amazing effect, and is perhaps where the magic lies, if it is to be found.

My principal and I attended a workshop given by Lucy Calkins last January. She was touring to promote her newest units of study in the writing workshop for grades 3-5 (Calkins, 2007). As members of our District Language Arts Committee and representatives of our K-2 building, we thought we would at least get some good information to bring home to our colleagues in the upper grades. We were blown away by her presentation. She spoke the entire day without notes, weaving personal truths about her writing journey into critical teaching points on how to help students find their own personal narratives. She taught a room filled with 500 teachers in a way as though she knew our collective strengths and areas of need, regardless of the grade levels we represented. By sharing what we learned and reading and discussing Lucy Calkins's work, we have found our voices as teachers of writing; we have learned that if we are not writers ourselves our students' writing will suffer.

Students Choose Topics

A key element of our new approach to teaching writing includes guiding students to choose their own topics. Since 2000, our staff has scored school-wide writing samples three times a year and also holds data meetings three times a year to discuss the progress of each and every child. The principal, classroom teacher, and specialists who provide support in our inclusion school all sit down and go through the teacher's class list. We talk about how the students'

skills are developing with a focus on literacy. We look at students' writing samples to track their development, discuss whether intervention is needed, and celebrate the successes our students achieve.

In years past, we required students to respond to a uniform prompt, such as "Write about a special place," or "Write about your favorite season." Teachers frequently expressed their frustration that the writing sample that resulted for a particular student did not necessarily reflect that student's best work. As a scoring team, we would shrug our shoulders and ask ourselves, "How can we get the kids to do a better job on the prompt?" Much of our reading by authors such as Lucy Calkins and Katie Wood Ray emphasized the authenticity of allowing the students to select their own topics. They assured us that if we gave over this control and focused on the writers, the writing would improve (Calkins, 2003; Ray, 2002).

We learned that allowing students to select their own topics is so much more than simply saying to them, "Write about whatever you want." It is giving them

specific strategies that will help them narrow their focus and tell their small moment story in a meaningful way. The strategies you teach your students are strategies you want them to use today and forever, from this day forward. (Calkins, January 9, 2007)

We took a leap of faith and eliminated the prompt. We simply asked the students to write about a "small moment" (Calkins, 2003) they would like to share. The children knew that this meant they were free to respond in any form and that the words "small moment" meant they could write about anything, anywhere, or anyone in their lives.

Have you ever triped in a hole
in a lake? Well I have, and
it herts bad, I'm telling you!
I forgot the name of the lake
but I know it was a silly
name! Well, anyway, back to the
story. I whent under water
becus I triped. But then I
come right back up agen. I
Scrymed, KNOW I WONT
TO DO THAT AGEN!!
So lowd that everyone thare

had to plug thare ears! That
wold prbbly make you
plug your ears to! Back
to the story, My hole family
was thare, some of my
frend's were thare also. I was
so colod when I got out of
the water, My lips were
perpol. Oh, if you are
wondering how I triped,
thare was a hole in the
middol of the lake.

Second-grade student writing sample 2

Have you ever triped in a hole in a lake? Well I have, and it herts bad, I'm telling you! I forgot the name of the lake but I know it was a silly name! Well, anyway, back to the story. I whent under water becus I triped, But then I came right back up agen. I scrymed. KNOW I WONT TO DO THAT AGEN!!" So lowd that everyone thare had to plug thare ears! That wold prbbly make you plug your ears to! Back to the story, My hole family was thare, some of my frend's were thare also. I was so cold when I got out of the water, my lips were perpol. Oh, if you are wondering how I triped, thare was a hole in the middol of the lake.

After they completed this writing, some students felt they had an even better piece tucked away in their writing folders. They were free to submit that piece instead, if they wished.

Becoming a Professional Learning Community

Maintaining the storm's momentum takes commitment to working together. We have refined our procedure for scoring the samples as we've grown in our own knowledge and practice. In the early years, each classroom teacher scored her own students' writing. Even though everyone used the state's MEAP rubric, questions of uniformity persisted. Classroom teachers wondered if they were too hard or not hard enough on their own students and some speculated that knowing what the child *meant* to say might influence the score. We moved to having each grade level team score their samples. This change produced more consistent scores across each grade level.

Teachers gathered around a large table and sorted the entire grade level's writing samples according to the MEAP six-point rubric. Lively discussion ensued as teachers debated where a particular piece belonged according to the traits outlined on the rubric. Patterns in grade-level strengths and areas in need of further instruction became apparent. Although this process became very time-consuming, teachers built a professional learning community during these conversations.

Because we used the writing sample scores for our tri-annual data meetings, there was a great deal of pressure to "hurry up and get them scored" when grade-level teams met after school. This urgency caused some teachers to wonder whether they were doing the process justice. To address the issue, our staff created a team to score the school-wide prompts. For the last 4 years, our principal, two Title I teachers, and our special education teacher have been the scoring team. Having the same four people score student writing eliminated our worries about uniformity.

Classroom teachers now take turns bringing student writing to a monthly writing planning time for discussion to keep the spirit of the learning community alive. This, combined with discussion at the data meetings, promotes the continuation of our professional growth.

My Changing Role

The storm affected my own path on this journey. My conversations and professional reading had focused on writing since hearing Katie Wood Ray at MRA in 2003. My excitement for learning about writing from a personal and professional standpoint drove my thinking. I began to form a vision for a new role. My position as the second-grade Title 1 teacher had been structured in the traditional way: I provided daily reading support and intervention in small groups. Could I increase my impact and share this excitement by working directly in classrooms? I shared my vision with the second-grade teachers: if all five classrooms blocked their language arts time in the afternoon, then I could still provide reading support, but could also teach anchor lessons in writing every week, in every class. We agreed to try it.

When I teach lessons in second-grade classrooms, first we look at a sample of student writing. Then, we look at the rubric associated with the trait we are focusing on and score the writing together. Before I do the direct teaching portion in my mini-lesson, I always say to the students, "Let's see how the pros do it!" and share a wonderful piece of literature that highlights the trait we are studying. Our decision to structure my day so that I could provide models and consistency across the grade level in our writing instruction has made a difference, and the data we are collecting reflect a transformation. What amazes us and confirms that a change is occurring is that the bulk of their writing scores on the six-point holistic MEAP rubric shifted toward the higher end of the scale. Our average score in the winter of 2006 was 3.2; the average score in the winter of 2007 is 3.7.

I also have collaborative planning time each month with the second-grade teachers to discuss how we're doing, what's working, and where we're going next in writing. It's a time to talk about what we've read lately in the field of writing and to share our thoughts. This teamwork is a wonderful source of professional development and has greatly tightened and aligned our writing program as a whole.

Our Perfect Storm

What factors contributed to the transformation of writing in our school? This had been the topic of informal discussion among several staff members, but it had not been resolved. I decided to inquire about whether teachers held any common opinions

about why our students' writing changed. I asked classroom teachers in our K-2 building to complete a survey in which they listed at least 10 factors that contributed to our transformation as a writing school and starred the one they felt had the most impact. Clearly this survey was informal and very open-ended, but it provides a glimpse of the teachers' perceptions. Of the 17 classroom teachers in our school, eight responded. Results show that there is no simple answer, but the teachers in our building showed several commonalities in their responses, as highlighted in Table 1.

It is evident that many factors have worked together to transform us from a school with kids who write into a writing school. Reading and talking about the work of Lucy Calkins, Katie Wood Ray, Ruth Culham, and Vicki Spandel were the impetus for this change. Having the expectation that all of our students can and will find their own small moments to write about, modeling how writers think and work, and connecting our study of writing to great literature have elevated our level of writing. Thinking, planning, learning, and growing together as a staff has been vital to our students' transformation. The leadership and support of our principal has been essential.

Standing in the middle of it feels a bit like being swept up in a tornado. Having taken a closer look, it's actually like a perfect storm—all of the right factors coming together at just the right time in the perfect way. We made these changes in our instruction systematically, with excellent information, plan-

ning, and conversation. We intended to improve our writing instruction and thus improve the writers in our school. In this case though, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts: the unexpected result is that our students don't just know what makes a great writer—they *are* great writers.

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Table 1: Teachers' Survey Responses

Factors that improve writing	Number of teachers (n=8)
Lucy Calkins—Units of Primary Study	7
Teaching using the 6+1 Traits of Writing—using specific language and rubrics	7
Calling students writers—having the expectation that they will write	5
Connecting writing lessons to great literature—studying craft	5
Teachers as writers—modeling	5
Making time to write daily	4
Professional development	4
Allowing students to select their own topics	4
Support/modeling in the classroom from Title I teacher (only in second-grade classrooms at the time of the survey)	3