The author's research stresses the importance of including uninterrupted time for teacher-led mini-lessons targeting students' struggles, independent writing time, conferencing, revising and editing sessions, and sharing time.

Writer's Workshop: Fostering Proficient Writers in the Elementary Classroom

Lindsay Allen

It is the first full week of school. Pencils are sharpened; crisp, clean, and unopened textbooks are stacked in a neat pile on each child's desk. The feeling of anticipation can be sensed in the room. How will I relate to each child? Do I have what it takes to reach each learner? Alas, the bell rings. There is no time to worry now. It is time to put all of the summer's preparation into action. As the days pass, I am learning that each child is not ready for my well-constructed, district-mandated curriculum. In fact, when given a writing assignment, most students struggle to pick up the pencil. I panic because the schedule dictates that they should write continuously for 30 minutes. Most students are done and "bored" after 5 to 6 minutes. Do I have a plan B? How will I ever be able to reach so many students? Is there a better, more streamlined way to communicate effective writing to each learner? How will "we" find success with such a dry and stringent method of teaching? Where will I find the resources that I need to modify and enhance a curriculum that is not working? Is there a method out there that will guide me through the process?

Sadly, this process is very common in today's classroom. What was once deemed acceptable as a writing curriculum is all too quickly failing our students. In the end, teachers are found to be as frustrated as the students. This is not the makeup of a successful writing program. On the contrary, it can be the direct spelling of DISASTER! We, as educators, need to change the way we are teaching the writing process to children, as well as work to transform the attitude many people have toward this curricular area. Graham, MacArthur, and Fitzgerald (2007) write:

> Teachers must demystify the writing process for students by teaching them that, regardless of how skilled they become, all writers will perform just like professional writers: They will utilize a process, adapted to their needs, to develop their manuscripts; they will go through several stages of revision; they will seek the responses of others; they will edit for errors at the manuscript level; and they will eventually realize that writing is never perfect and open to revision. (p. 33)

Many educators are searching for an effective way to teach their current writing curriculum. Can Writer's Workshop help children become better writers? Research shows that if educators implement specific components,

Writer's Workshop can be used as a vehicle to foster proficient writers in the elementary classroom. A detailed description of the history of writing, the writing process, and an explanation of the specific elements of writing are included in this article to broaden the reader's understanding of Writer's Workshop.

History of Writing

Throughout the decades, writing instruction in educational institutions has been altered and changed. In the past, it was a teacher-led activity where students did what they were told to do. It was a cookie-cutter system that resembled an assembly line: Educators assigned papers, students completed the writing, and students turned in the final product for a grade. Therefore, the focus was placed on the finished product rather than on the process of understanding how writers go through a tedious progression before accomplishing the finished work. Writing was taught as "a sequence of essential skills: forming letters, building vocabulary, identifying parts of speech, diagramming sentences, mastering grammar and punctuation, and following paragraph types and genres of writing according to prescribed conventions" (Nagin and National Writing Project, 2006, p. 19). In essence, the purpose of writing was not explained, and it was not taught as a process.

It is clear that education has evolved over the years. Katie Wood Ray (2004), a professional consultant and the author of multiple books on teaching writing, strongly believes that students should understand that Writer's Workshop "is a *time*, not a task" (p. 102), and that children need to show responsibility and manage themselves through this block of time. Writing has become more of a process that extends over a period of time (days, weeks, months, even years). It is critical that children view the length of time it takes to create a piece and the process of Writer's Workshop in a positive way so they are able to communicate with the individuals with whom they want to share.

For the purposes of this literature review, the writing process refers to the steps an actual writer performs in order to create a piece of writing. It involves brainstorming ideas, researching, writing, revising, editing, and publishing in some format. Instead of focusing on the final product, the focus is placed on a process that fosters each individual child. According to Fletcher and Portalupi (2001), the writing cycle can be labeled "in separate consecutive stages, but the fact is that writers move fluidly in and out of these stages" (p. 62). The stages about which they are talking include:

- Prewriting (rehearsal and brainstorming)—planning and creating of ideas before any actual writing takes place;
- Rough Drafting—writing quickly to get thoughts down on paper; not paying close attention to the mechanics/conventions;
- Revising—making changes to the written work: correcting, updating, improving, and/or adapting it;
- Editing—focusing on mechanics, such as spelling and punctuation; and
- Publishing—sharing the finished written piece with an audience.

In order for Writer's Workshop to function as expected, though, teachers need to have a clear understanding of themselves as writers and a vision of how they want to see their students develop as writers. As indicated by Carl Nagin and the National Writing Project (2006), authors of *Because Writing Matters: Improving Student Writing in Our Schools*, educators need more guidance and staff development when it comes to teaching writing. "Because writing often involves complex thinking and problem solving, teachers need more than a set of fixed textbook procedures to teach it well and address the diverse needs of student writers" (p. 15). It is imperative that school districts, administrators, and teachers all work together and support one another to better comprehend the writing process and how children learn to write. "It cannot be emphasized enough that it is the *expertise* of the teacher and not a particular method of teaching writing that will ensure success" (Karsbaek, 2011, p. 8). Therefore, educators need to be exposed to effective professional development opportunities in order to better understand this curricular area.

Writer's Workshop

Writer's Workshop is an approach to organize meaningful instruction with a balanced literacy approach. By incorporating opportunities to differentiate the writing process, teachers will better be able to meet a variety of needs in an inclusive classroom (Frey & Fisher, 2006). Essentially, it is a technique to meet all the diverse needs of individuals in order to foster proficient writers. Regie Routman (2005), a literacy specialist, suggests we "think of writing workshop as the time in which everything writers do to create a meaningful piece of writing for a reader takes place" (p. 174). This is the daily block of time (45–60 minutes) consisting of direct instruction (mini-lessons targeting specific skills and strategies), independent writing on self-selected topics, conferencing, revising and editing, and sharing. Holly

Oszakiewski and Maureen Spelman (2011), authors of "The Reading/Writing Workshop: An Approach to Improving Literacy Achievement and Independent Literacy Habits," write:

> The workshop approach creates a learning environment for all levels of learners; such an environment focuses on creating a balance of instruction that begins with an examination of students' current abilities and then scaffolds the growth of individual students toward independence. In the workshop approach, teachers invite, nurture, and support student engagement. (p. 13)

Writing is a craft, and just like any other technique, students and teachers need to consider Writer's Workshop a valuable time of the day when children compose their thoughts and ideas in a safe environment that is conducive to learning.

Mini-Lessons

Several components of Writer's Workshop are essential to fostering proficient writers. The first element is using direct instruction in the form of a mini-lesson to target specific skills for struggling writers. A mini-lesson is a short, explicit, whole-class lesson that is based on the students' needs at a given time (Dorn & Soffos, 2001). These 10-to-15-minute instructional periods allow the teacher to explain a particular skill or strategy in which the students need more practice. Directly following, students are given the opportunity to exercise that skill in a nurturing learning environment. Teachers use a gradual release of responsibility: presenting/explaining the skill to students and offering them time for guided practice to better comprehend the material. The goal is for the children to eventually move into independent writing where they can show their knowledge of the skill.

During this time, teachers need to expose children to numerous quality pieces of literature modeling the element of writing with which students are struggling. This is where mentor texts come into play. "Mentor texts are pieces of literature that we can return to again and again as we help our young writers learn how to do what they may not yet be able to do on their own" (Dorfman & Cappelli, 2007, p. 2). The use of children's literature is one of the best ways to visually and auditorily demonstrate the different aspects of writing. Fletcher and Portalupi (2001) write that "with you as a guide, and literature as the landscape, you can open young writers' eyes to the full range of possibilities before them" (p. 82). This idea reaches the core of why mentor texts are so important for children during Writer's Workshop. Children need specific, repetitive modeling, and children's literature provides a plethora of examples that multi-age children can easily understand or imitate. Mentor texts can help children reach a deeper comprehension of the writing process, which in turn makes them stronger writers.

Independent Writing

After mini-lessons are completed and the children have had time to practice the necessary skills together, they then move into independent writing. In the past, it has always been understood that the teacher would assign a writing prompt, and the children would write for the specified amount of time on the given topic. However, the focus has graduated into a more independent choice for each student. Giving children the opportunity to choose topics about which they are passionate increases the levels of motivation and engagement in the writing process. "While the teachers may determine what gets taught, only the student can decide what will be learned. This is true for learners of any age. We learn best when we have a reason that propels us to want to learn" (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001, p. 9). Students experience a greater level of engagement when teachers give them the choice of subject matter (animals, Legos, video games); format (fiction, nonfiction, narrative, poetry); and finally of the pacing and "work time." Most important, students are able to see a finished product that is a direct reflection of their hard work and independent choices.

According to Dorfman and Cappelli (2007), "Writers should always have a place where they can record their writing ideas so they are not lost when it comes time for writing workshop" (p. 21). Having a "treasure chest" of ideas will decrease the amount of time children spend on choosing a topic, as well as decrease the stress and anxiety that could arise during Writer's Workshop. Children need to have a number of ideas (pictures or words) to choose from when it comes time to write. These should differ in categories in order to create interest with all learners. The students' ideas can be stored in many different ways: writer's notebook, treasure chest, posters/lists on the wall, writing folder, or sticky notes. It does not matter how children record their thoughts as long as they have access to them on a daily basis.

Along with giving children choices during Writer's Workshop, teachers need to give students extended amounts of time to write and more freedom when it comes to pacing (i.e., specific due dates for writing samples):

> It is crucial for students to have frequent, predictable times set aside for them to write. Plan to schedule a minimum of three days a week for about an hour each day. Four or five days is even better. It's

> important that students know when the workshop is scheduled so that they are ready to meet it. When students know they'll have a specific time to return to a piece of writing in progress, they think about that work when they are away from their desks. (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001, p. 8)

Writer's Workshop *should not* be the time when children are responding to teacher-led writing assignments. Instead, this should be a time when children are using the writing process to record and work on topics that are interesting to them. This freedom gives students an opportunity to take control of their own writing development.

Since Writer's Workshop is an extended block of time, children need to truly understand the rules and expectations of the workshop. It is crucial that students know how to manage their time effectively in order to become more proficient writers. This means children need to have a plan as to how they are going to tackle the writing process in order to get the most out of this valuable time. "Many students hold a naïve view that professional authors complete their published pieces after composing one draft and doing some minor revisions" (Graham, et al., 2007, p. 33). Writer's Workshop is a cycle; therefore, this is the time that children should be working diligently on brainstorming, rough drafting, revising, editing, and publishing their pieces. Teachers will benefit from establishing the Writer's Workshop format at the beginning of the school year, and this should be practiced numerous times in order to reinforce the proper etiquette.

Conferencing

Another essential component of Writer's Workshop is conferencing. It is extremely important for teachers to conduct individual conferences with each student during the writing process and to review certain skills that will help strengthen the piece. This allows students to receive specific feedback from others (teacher and peers) in a timely manner. Donald Graves (1994), author of *A Fresh Look at Writing*, maintains that children should be the ones doing most of the talking during student–teacher conferences—up to about 80% of the time. This means the teacher rarely speaks—only about 20% of the 3-to-5-minute conference. The reason for this discrepancy is because this should be the time for children to read their writing, explain their thought processes, ask questions of the teacher, and self-reflect on the content. During this time, the teacher listens and makes notes of difficulties that need to be addressed by mini-lessons. Conference notes help teachers adapt their teaching, serving as a guide for the needed direct instruction in order to take children to the next level in their writing. Student–teacher conferences really need to be centered on the children sharing because they are the ones who educate the teacher about their topics and how they write about them.

As teachers meet with individual children, they should not only focus on making the piece of writing better, but on making the writer better (Calkins, 1986). The main responsibility of the teacher during this time is to listen. Instead of sitting directly across from the child and staring into his or her eyes, there needs to be a more "teacher as guide" approach: the teacher sitting by the child, looking at the piece of writing with the child, listening to the child read and explain his or her thoughts, and encouraging the child to continue expressing his or her ideas in written form. There should be guidance with the content and gentle reminders about conventions, but specific skills should not be addressed at this time. Instead, re-teaching of skills can either take place during a whole-class mini-lesson or during a small-group lesson if only a few students struggle with the strategy.

Peer conferencing, children working with one another, can also be powerful. Cathy Hsu (2009) believes that children working in partnerships foster repeated conferencing among the students. This substantially increases students' practice with the critiquing phase and editing phase. Teachers need to find their own methodology for pairing up students, but they should keep in mind that it can be beneficial to use mixed-gender or multicultural groups so the children gain a different perspective from one another. Also, most students perform better and feel more confident if they are placed with someone who has a similar ability level. Since partnerships work better if they are long term, it is important for the children to feel comfortable with one another.

Introducing peer conferencing to students is a slow process that involves strong modeling and time to practice. For example, it might take a week for the students to truly comprehend peer conferencing. The time frame will depend on the teacher and the students. A typical week might look like this:

- Establish that writing partners are a powerful, long-term resource.
- Involve students in articulating rules and expectations for partnership work.
- Train students to be accountable to partners by checking in at the start and end of independent writing time.
- Promote student-initiated partner conferences.
- Teach effective response skills using an age-appropriate strategy (Hsu, 2009).

However long it takes, it will be well worth the wait when teachers begin to see children writing proficiently throughout the rest of the school year.

Revising and Editing

The most direct type of revision for teachers to give children is feedback on the conventions. However, the concentration of feedback for early writers should be focused on the substance of their message, not the mechanics (Painter, 2006). Peer editing lends itself well to helping one another with clarifying ideas; nevertheless, teachers tend to shy away from this because they do not believe peers do an efficient job. With guidance from the teacher, children can learn to edit for content. According to Calkins (1986), "One way to support young children's growth in writing, then, is by encouraging them to read what they have written to the children working alongside them, and most of all, to themselves" (p. 60). In order to accommodate this way of thinking, children should sit at tables—beside their partner—during the editing portion of Writer's Workshop.

As stated earlier, teachers need to model their expectations for the revising phase at the beginning of the school year. Editing can be done in several ways. Peers can utilize the basic checklist to look for meaning, parts of the paper, and mechanics. They can also act out one another's writing to make sure the content makes sense. Finally, children can assess one another's writing by using the class rubric to informally grade each other. All these options will target the strengths and weaknesses of the writing in a nonthreatening way. It will also help the children better reflect on their own compositions as they work during Writer's Workshop.

After the content has been edited and revised, the teacher can help the students edit for conventions. Teacher assistants and parent volunteers can also be utilized during this part of the process since this is only dealing with the basic mechanics of writing. Again, it is important for children to understand grammar and punctuation rules; however, the content should be the real focus of revising—especially at the younger ages.

Sharing

The final phase of Writer's Workshop is sharing the completed piece in some format, and this should last 10–15 minutes. Two nationally recognized personalities in the area of language and literacy teaching, Lucy McCormick Calkins and Shelley Harwayne (1991), write:

> Writers need this sense of fullness, of readiness to write, or responsiveness. It can come from storytelling, it can come from shared responses to literature, it can come from bringing boxes and files of writing we've done in our lives and reading excerpts aloud appreciatively with each other. It can come from camping together and sharing thoughts and stories around the campfire. However it comes, it's terribly important. (p. 31)

At the end of each writing session, student work should be acknowledged by the class as a whole. This can be done by having two to three children share the piece on which they have been working, even if it is not complete. The idea is for the volunteers to read their writing and for the others to listen without interruptions. When the reader is finished sharing, the class can openly discuss the strengths in the writing, as well as ask questions about parts that might need more clarification. By sharing their work with others, children begin to realize the importance of audience and start to think of writing from the author's point of view, as well as from the audience's point of view. Sharing also gives the children another opportunity to reflect on the writing process.

Another way children may share their writing is by sharing their work with other individuals (Painter, 2006). This can be done in many ways: in front of the class, in a small group, with reading buddies, in the reading lounge, at an assembly, or by inviting parents and other staff members to a publishing party. The platform for sharing is not as important as the meaning behind it. Students should feel accomplished and motivated to begin a new piece, and the sharing process will help encourage children to continue writing.

When a composition is completed, the piece should be published in some fashion. One way to have children "publish their work" is by incorporating the Author's Chair. The author has the opportunity to share the piece of writing with the entire class while sitting in a special chair dedicated to published authors. Everyone is able to celebrate the successes of the children in the class. Sitting in the chair is an honor, and the Author's Chair acts as a motivator to keep students writing and publishing.

Implications in the Classroom

One implication for the classroom involves the environment where students are working. Children need to believe they are in a supportive and nurturing writing environment where it is acceptable to ask questions, make mistakes, and celebrate the successes. The goals of Writer's Workshop should be to present the fun side to writing, to help children realize they have important ideas to communicate with others, to teach/reinforce specific skills with explicit mini-lessons and individual conferencing, and to experience writing as an author experiences writing. "The teacher's responsibility is to invite, nurture, and sustain engagement with literature" (Atwell, 2009, p. 1). Teachers should incorporate

different areas around the room for the different stages in the writing process. Some things to consider are the following: a comfortable, quiet place to write (desks and tables); a place for blank paper (lined and unlined); a storage area for student writing journals and folders; access to mentor texts; a section dedicated to numerous amounts of children's literature (poetry, fiction, graphic novels, nonfiction); a conference zone; access to reference materials such as dictionaries, thesauri, and word walls; and an Author's Chair.

Another implication in the classroom is creating enough uninterrupted time to teach writing. Teachers might need to rethink curricular priorities and change things around in the classroom schedule to find the time needed to run a successful Writer's Workshop. They will also need to work closely with their administration to make this possible. As was previously stated, children need to become habituated to spending 30 to 60 minutes each day working on their writing. "Over a year in a writing workshop, students should come to understand that writing is something someone sits down and works at for an extended period of time" (Ray, 2004, p. 102). Everyone—students, staff, and administrators—will need to work together to make this happen.

A final implication in the classroom deals with management of the writing workshop. Classrooms need to be set up with Writer's Workshop in mind: writing materials, tables or desks designated to writing, and a special place to share works-in-progress or finished compositions (i.e., Author's Chair). The children need to have a place where they can write down all their brainstorming ideas, and it is important for them to have a system for storing unfinished products (i.e., writer's notebook, writing folder, book box). All of these management expectations need to be expressed at the beginning of the year so there is no confusion as to what to do and where to go during Writer's Workshop.

Challenges

One challenge that can occur during Writer's Workshop is when partners are not 100% engaged and focused on the task at hand during the peer editing phase. Sometimes children get silly with one another, or they get off-topic while talking about other things. If this is the case, the teacher needs to step in immediately to readdress the expectations for Writer's Workshop. By stopping the inappropriate behaviors right away and discussing the importance of why these behaviors are not acceptable during workshop time, the children will have a better understanding of and appreciation for this phase of the writing process. Over time, students will build stamina and be able to stay focused for longer periods of time.

A second challenge that can occur during peer editing is that some children may concentrate only on the mechanics of writing instead of focusing on the content. If this is the case, the teacher will need to do a few mini-lessons to reiterate the important aspects of conferencing: why we do it, how we do it, and what it looks/sounds like.

Another challenge teachers may face is how to integrate Writer's Workshop and the district's expectations for writing. This can be done with enough time and creativity. School curriculum programs have much validity, and teachers cannot ignore these programs because they have concrete benchmarks that students need to reach. Therefore, teachers need to merge the district writing curriculum into Writer's Workshop by incorporating the essential skills into the workshop sessions. Direct instruction in the form of mini-lessons gives teachers the time to provide the necessary information to the children. During these 10-to-15-minute sessions, children learn the district material and have time to practice the skills before moving into the next phase of Writer's Workshop.

Furthermore, there is a risk that next year's teacher does not implement Writer's Workshop. It is imperative that ALL teachers in the community get on board with a program like this in order for it to be successful. By providing numerous opportunities for professional development and collaboration during staff meetings and school improvement days, administrators have the opportunity to informally reiterate and reinforce their expectations of Writer's Workshop for the whole school.

Also of additional concern may be the dreaded budget and the much needed resources, resources, resources. Although Writer's Workshop is not an extremely costly program to initiate, some materials will need to be purchased. In this economy, staff members may need to work together in order to acquire the things they may need in order for Writer's Workshop to be successful, or they may need to encourage parents to donate some items for this important program. In addition, many schools have a Parent Teacher Association or Home and School Organization that may offer grant opportunities to the staff in order to purchase materials for programs such as Writer's Workshop. Again, with a little time and creativity, there are several ways to acquire the necessary resources.

A final challenge to implementing Writer's Workshop has to do with finding the 45-to-60-minute block of *uninterrupted* writing time each day. Teachers and administrators will need to work closely together to dedicate this time in order to foster proficient writers, while at the same time meeting the needs of students in reading and mathematics. At first, this may be a daunting

process; but with time, training, and practice, Writer's Workshop can become a seamless part of everyone's school day.

Conclusion

Think back to the scenario painted at the beginning of this article. We can ALL relate to that feeling of panic and failure. We also know the feeling that something is missing. By utilizing programs like Writer's Workshop, we, as educators, can begin to fill in the gaps. We can rework and better communicate the process to our learners. From there, we will find that students will become more independent, confident, and successful writers. We, in turn, will become more effective and accomplished educators. Success is simple if the resources are available and if we are willing to make sense of them. By fully implementing the essential components of writing, Writer's Workshop can be successful in fostering proficient writers in the elementary classroom. After all, this is the story ending that we are all hoping to achieve.

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