Year One in the writing workshop : a step in the right direction

Michelle L. Grimm
University of Northern Iowa

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Abstract
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Michelle L. Grimm
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Rick Traw
Date Approved: 8/25/03
Graduate Faculty Reader

Jean Suchsland Schneider
Date Approved: 8/25/03
Graduate Faculty Reader

Rick Traw
Date Approved: 8/25/03
Head, Department of Curriculum and Instruction
Year One in The Writing Workshop: A Step in the Right Direction

I entered the 2002-2003 school year in a strange and scary place. After six years of teaching literature classes to seventh and eighth grade students, a position where I felt comfortable and knowledgeable, I found myself with a new assignment: teaching English to three sections of seventh graders and one section of eighth graders, as well as continuing my three seventh grade literature sections. The thirty-two-year veteran English teacher had retired and budget cuts demanded that I assume the role. "To teach well, we do not need more techniques, activities, and strategies. We need a sense of what is essential" (Calkins 9). I asked myself what was essential as I began studying the reading and writing workshop approach.

I had endless questions and concerns. Through reading, I discovered that I could adapt my literature classes into a workshop approach with few changes; many of those ideas and methods were already at work in my classroom. But how would I teach writing? I was inspired by the complete workshop approach in Atwell's In the Middle, although doubted that I could give twelve-year-olds the kind of freedom that she stressed in her pedagogy. The structured style of Linda Rief's Seeking Diversity: Language Arts with Adolescents seemed closer to my comfort level. In her classroom, students often completed whole class assignments and books based on the current unit of study. I continued reading.

After my initial fear, I grew excited about the new possibilities. I was interested in teaching in a way that made more sense to me. I felt that my teaching both English and literature was a step in the right direction for my students. In the past, I felt no responsibility for their writing, and therefore made no connection between what they were reading and what they were writing. I knew this was a problem with the way the classes were structured but lacked the time to work more closely with the English teacher. I saw many
benefits in connecting these two important literacy pieces in a way that would become important and beneficial to students, in a way that would allow them to read as writers and write as readers (Rief 16). I wanted to keep my seventh graders engaged in meaningful writing and to help them learn more about themselves through their reading and writing in a classroom atmosphere and style that worked with their nature. My goal became to learn how to combine teaching grammar and writing, while making those important, previously neglected, connections to their reading.

This article will discuss some of the questions I faced in the implementation of the elements of writers’ workshop in my classroom. I focused on seven of the traditional workshop elements: time, ownership, modeling, conferences, mini-lessons, response, and sharing or publishing. These common elements can be implemented into the classroom in a variety of ways, and I will briefly define them. Time is vital in the organization of a writing workshop. Children need daily writing time in order to develop fluency in their writing. Students also need to be allowed ownership; students should choose their own topics rather than teachers choosing topics for them. Additionally, writers must have models. These models may include student, teacher, or professional pieces in a variety of genres; all should show the writer examples of quality writing. Conferences are another element in the writing workshop. Writers need to talk about their writing with their teachers and other members of the writing community, including their peers. Mini-lessons, five to twenty-minute whole group lessons, should be included in a workshop. These lessons teach students about the procedures of the classroom and about the writing craft. Response to students’ writing is critical to growth. Students need honest, gentle feedback to help improve writing (Atwell 217). Finally, sharing and publishing complete
the traditional elements in the writing workshop. Sharing time involves students reading their writing to the whole class and getting feedback. Publishing work takes writing outside the classroom doors: to other members of the school or the community, to the town paper, or to professional writing contests. Each element was important and required consideration to implement into the writing workshop in my classroom.

In addition to incorporating the elements of the writing workshop into my classroom, I encountered other questions in trying to reach my goal of creating a workshop. I will share some of the additional questions I struggled with throughout the year. I will include the research that suggests answers to the issues of structuring a writers’ workshop for the middle school student. I will conclude by sharing some of the successes that came from the writing workshop in my seventh grade English classroom.

How do I implement the elements of the writing workshop: time, ownership, modeling, conferences, mini-lessons, response, and sharing or publishing? (Cramer 46-47, Atwell 140).

Time: As long as the district objectives were covered, I had the benefit of complete freedom in my teaching decisions. I recognized students needed sufficient chunks of time to write, and I had the autonomy to structure that time. “If students are not engaged in writing at least 4 days out of 5, and for a period of 35-40 minutes, beginning in first grade, they will have little opportunity to think through the medium of writing. Three days a week are not sufficient” (Graves 104). Children who do not write daily cannot get into the rhythm of writing. However, providing the time was not the problem. I worried about what my students would do with the time and perhaps as a self-fulfilling prophecy, my fears were confirmed. Not all of my students wrote.
tried Linda Rief's positive-negative graph, where students list good and bad events that have happened in their lives and plot these points on a graph as a source for writing topics. This produced more beneficial results, but they exhausted these topics within the first five weeks of school. How was I going to get them to come up with important topics on their own? How would they write their required three to five pages of rough draft per week on something meaningful to them? I panicked and ran to what I knew best - structure. I showed them some places to find possible topics, and I also assigned more structured works to help them work through the writing process. This approach helped Jake, who would stare helplessly at a blank page for days. Then we connected his interest in reading the newspaper to his love of comedy, and this led to poems blasting our nation's leaders, and left Jake feeling he was a writer.

How should I begin to help students understand they have something important to say? "The more we know about our students, the easier it becomes to teach wisely and well. We need to begin the school year by bringing children's lives - their family photos and family stories, their hobbies and their collections - into the classroom" (Harwayne 30). Mark was a student with low self-confidence, a rough home life, and a penchant for acting up to get attention. He would stare at his paper and prepare to kick Trent in the shins because he was restless, and I had to sit down and talk to him on his level. He was resistant, therefore the more I knew about Mark the easier it was for me to make a connection that might get him started on an idea. I did this simply by talking to him about what is going on in his own life.

In August, I had my students complete a literacy history, so that I could learn more about my students reading and writing activities as they were growing up and throughout their school lives. Through this activity and a
survey, I could get some ideas about their background and attitudes, but I needed to expand on my activities in the beginning of the year to build a better foundation for a community of readers and writers. "Unless we begin to understand what our students know, how they know it, and what they value about it, we waste their time. Worse, if our students think we don't know something special about them, which they value, they may find learning to be an isolated and meaningless exercise" (Graves 27).

I have learned the writing process begins with rehearsal. I needed to get students thinking like writers, and doing what writers do before I jumped into giving them complete ownership. The writer's notebook is a tool many writing teachers use to work on the rehearsal process, the place where writers decide on and develop a topic. Many writing teachers spend up to six weeks building the ideas in a writer's notebook to ensure writing ideas for the months to come. The majority of my students did not consider themselves writers at the beginning of the year and they needed time to build up their notebooks. Choice was scary to those reluctant writers. Clark was emphatically not a reader or writer when he entered seventh grade and therefore was hesitant, but eventually took his writing cues from his own life. After he began writing, he gained some confidence in his ability, and he gained admiration from his classmates for his writing. By the end of the year, he was considered the "King of Leads" due to the well-written beginnings he gave his pieces. He wrote two descriptive nonfiction pieces, one about fishing called, "Fishing on the Slick Stuff." It began, "In the winter I go fishing with my dad. The ice is about 2-3 inches thick, cloudy and gray, and I can see the fish under it." He also wrote "Monster Bucks," which contained a lead that caught my attention, "In December, monster bucks roam the woods." Clark would have been insolent all year if I had given him writing
topics, but the writers' workshop gave him the freedom to choose his topics and explore, through writing, what was important in his life - his relationship with his dad and their mutual love of the outdoors.

The authority to choose empowered the confident readers and writers in my classroom. John wrote immediately and in length about his passion, extreme sports, but he considered himself a reader and writer and was ready to get started without working extensively on building up his notebook. Members of his class were always inspired to add more description to their own pieces after hearing an installment from John's "Road to the X-Games" series. The following is an excerpt from "Road to the X-Games 3: The Finals,"

They stepped up to the side of the platform and put their boards on the edge. Justin stood on the left and Nate was on the right. They looked across at each other and nodded.

They left the platform at the exact same time, pulling synchronized grinds, inverts, grabs, and flips for a minute and a half, until the grand finale, or what everyone thought was the grand finale. The 540 Kickflip to Indy under the McTwist 720.

They both hopped onto the platform.

"Nate, here you go. We've got about 20 seconds left in our run. Make it good, okay?" Justin said.

"You bet. Wish me luck." Nate said, and he ran up to the drop-in box.

He stepped up and set down his board. Justin ran up behind him and raised his arms in the air to get the crowd pumped.

Nate took a deep breath and shoved off. 15 seconds left.

He pumped hard and flew steadily into the air, setting up for landing. 12 seconds left.

He pumped again. He was so close he could taste it. Or was it the breakfast burrito he'd eaten earlier? He wasn't sure, so he shook it off. He was 10 feet over the deck. 9 seconds to go.

Nate tucked low and got ready for the next wall. This was it.

He flew up the wall and tucked down into a ball. One rotation. Still rising. Two rotations. Coming down. One half rotation left.

He got the last half in a little late. His back wheels hit the ramp, and eventually so did his front wheels. He started to lose his balance, but he bounced back and recovered.

Nate Renaldi landed the 900 for the first time in public with more than one witness and hundreds of pictures to back him up. The crowd was
immediately on their feet screaming. The announcer just lost his voice.

I plan on taking more responsibility next fall to get to know my students as people, writers, and readers and to work toward building their notebooks more than I did last fall. I can see the benefit in allowing ownership for kids like Clark and John.

Literature is also a good source for ideas, one Harwayne (60) values as a major resource for generating topics. “Literature plays a key role in helping children’s voices take the floor. Literature triggers thought, unlocks memories, and helps create the kind of community in which it is safe to tell stories” (Harwayne 60). “Ideas come from everywhere - from family stories, haunting images, and overheard conversations, from firsthand experiences as well as responses to movies and museums and social studies lessons” (Harwayne 61).

Immersing students in literature isn’t enough; we need to teach children how to respond to those stories and emotions in writing before this becomes a useful tool. Harwayne suggests using the writer's notebook as a tool for helping students keep track of their thinking, both when responding to literature and to life around us. Again, the writer’s notebook can be a helpful tool in the rehearsal process. Spending time in August reading and discussing texts helped students bring out their own stories. One of my priorities at the beginning of the year was to help students make connections between their reading and their writing, and I saw this happen when Ann wrote a slave story after reading Gary Paulsen's Nightjohn and Sarny and Mildred Taylor's Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry. Mary, a die-hard Bruce Coville fan, wrote several poems about her favorite mystical creature, the unicorn, as a way to escape her family problems.

I know I can make a powerful impact on my seventh graders with literature by going a step further, by demonstrating how to connect their
reading to their writing. Many of them already love what they're reading, but I need to show them all they can learn from their authors, to use the professional writers they admire as mentors. "...Students will make reading-writing connections when they're looking for reading-writing connections. But are they looking? Do our students know that writers take lessons from their reading? Do our students know that there is such a thing as reading as a writer?" (Harwayne 30).

Purpose is also important in building ownership. If students can identify a reason for putting pen to paper, a way that the writing will be meaningful in their own lives, the less resistant they become. "Writing is a highly personal medium through which we communicate the facts and the meaning of our experience. The hard part is realizing that we actually have something to say" (Graves 36). I thought students knew that everyday life was a rich source of topics, but that was not the case. I tried to teach them that what they face each day was a good place to start. Amy took her cue from her life when she wrote about what worried her; through her essay she came up with her own answers to her fears. She wondered about dying and going to war, then she concluded,

But the cool thing about not knowing your future is, it surprises you when it happens and once I really thought about the subject, it's okay to wonder about these things. But I don't want to know. I need to just live my life and enjoy being young and enjoy what's around now.

Many wrote poems and some wrote fictional stories with themselves as the main characters in order to think through their own situations. We started paying more attention to the world around us, to the problems and important things in our own lives. We examined areas we wanted to explore, and we started coming up with ideas and feeling ownership in writing.

**Modeling:** On the year-end survey, the majority of students said they
became better writers because they wrote everyday. I didn't write enough to become a better writer, and I didn't share. I never modeled one of my own pieces. When I wanted to show students effective writing, I used professional models or student samples. Miles Horton believed, "That the best teacher is the one who demonstrates for others how to learn by learning herself" (Shannon 419). I struggled with many of the same issues my students did: I struggled coming up with topics. I didn't want to share what I had written because I was too shy or it was too personal or I didn't believe it was good enough. This year was overwhelming to me. Most of my free time was spent reading student papers, and I didn't take the time to write outside of class. Yet Graves (42) said, "Writing with your students is probably the single most powerful thing you will do to help them learn to write." I learned a lot about writing this year and plan to write and share my own writing next year. I will start by developing a sense of community where both my students and I can fully express our feelings through writing, where there is trust and respect (Solley 6). Frank Smith stated, "Children learn what is demonstrated" (Harwyane 298). What did I demonstrate by being a writing teacher who didn't write enough and didn't feel comfortable sharing her writing?

Conferences: I took Atwell's advice and designated two areas for peer conference spaces, one in the back corner of the room and one at the hallway desk right outside the door (Atwell 104). I think the areas worked well and will keep them for next year. However, I will need to work further on explaining the purpose of the peer conference, as well as the peer conference form. The peer conference form was intended to get students to reread their piece, then to think about what help they wanted to receive from their peer, to think about how to make the piece better, to give direction to the time spent talking about writing.
Unfortunately, the conferences were often misused as time to chat, rather than used to improve writing. I think there was value in peer conferences, but I needed to have more mini-lessons on the purpose and modeling of a well-run peer conference. I needed to show students what a helpful conference looked like before I expected them to run one (Atwell 158).

The number of students that charged into my classroom per day brought up more questions for me. In forty-eight minutes, how can I talk to my 27 students individually about the pieces they were working on? How does a teacher “quickly” complete a status of the class while each member quietly listens? Atwell (140) recommended three minutes for this activity, but this was not an efficient use of our time. Students weren’t listening to what others were writing, they were talking to each other. Instead I worked individually to keep notes when I talked to students during writing conferences. I wondered if I was doing it “right” when I asked the status of the class questions: what they were working on, which genre, what the piece was about, and where they were as part of the writer’s conference. I became frustrated because I was often not able to talk to each student every day for two reasons. I often ran out of time, or the students were out of the classroom: at band lessons, working in the computer lab, or absent that day.

Another difficulty I faced when conferring with students was the volume of their voices. Some students did not remember to whisper, and when I would start talking, everyone would start talking. How could I teach them to whisper? Atwell teaches her students through mini-lessons, which I thought ridiculous before school started, but now see as necessary (Atwell 143). In the nine months I taught Tony, I never succeeded in teaching him to whisper. His voice bellowed throughout the classroom anytime he spoke. Also, I didn’t want to interrupt the
students who were writing; they were concentrating and focusing on what they were doing. I hate to be interrupted when I am thinking, and I don’t like to do that to my students. Should I have interrupted their work to ask my questions? I concluded that it depended on the student and the situation. Some students can get back to work, students like Justine, for example, who loved reading and writing and playing with words. Other students wanted an interruption so they could stop working, such as Mike. He was immature for his age and had trouble focusing on any task for too long. After getting to know my students, it became easy to tell them apart.

I now feel more confident in my ability to simply listen to students rather than think I needed to solve every problem a student was facing in their writing. In the beginning, I thought I needed to solve every problem everyday. It’s impossible; there isn’t enough of me to go around. Over time, I realized students can help each other, or I can point them in the right direction, rather than giving them the answer. This solved the problem of only having one teacher and allowed them to grow independent (Atwell 221). Students soon learned who were the experts in their section, and in eighth hour, students went to Aaron for help in proofreading, Kory for sports questions, and Kyle if they were stuck and needed some advice on where to go next in the story.

**Mini-Lessons:** At the beginning of the year, I had no idea how to plan mini-lessons. I was afraid of the conversational tone in which they were supposed to be taught, and I didn’t feel comfortable in trying the models I had read. “There is no ‘1001 mini-lessons for every occasion.’ ...What we decide to teach in a mini-lesson depends on what we see happening in our classroom” (Harwayne 307). I now understand that my students and I weren’t coming together in a circle on the carpet, but I was conducting mini-lessons. I was
teaching them the procedural lessons of the classroom, such as how to check books out of the classroom library, how to hand papers into the basket, where to hold a peer conference, and how to work with a partner. I was also teaching them about the craft of writing. We talked about possible writing topics, proofreading symbols, elements that make up short stories, and making sure the piece has purpose and enough information. We also talked about descriptive writing, titles, leads, and conclusions. We discussed genres and qualities of good writing, point of view and developing characters. I had thought mini-lessons had to be cute little lessons that were in some way magical and wonderfully entertaining. I have learned not to take myself so seriously and that these informal lessons can be very beneficial. I can keep them short enough to fit students’ attention spans and still give them time to work on their writing. I’m not afraid of them anymore; in fact, I’m excited about August. I feel like I have something to teach my students about writing. Soon I can have a file drawer that contains examples of mini-lessons that have helped students (Solley 52).

Response: When students began handing in drafts for me to read, I was baffled by how I should respond. I knew Donald Graves recommended always responding first to content, but what should I say? How could I help these students improve? I turned to the writing craft lists Atwell published in the second edition of In the Middle (176-178), because I needed a starting point. From reading drafts, I could see that students’ needed lots of help on many different topics. There was so much to cover! Talking about effective writing helped; it gave us some common ground. It was apparent I needed to better explain the idea that the writing needs to answer the question, “So what?” because so many of their pieces had no conflict, no problem. I felt much more informed about what makes good writing, and I also understood there is no one
right place to begin a writers’ workshop. It all depends on the students.

I also didn’t know how to respond to the errors made in these pieces. Should I correct every error? Should I let it all go? I felt comforted when I read the words of college English professor, Todd Heydon, “See everything, overlook a great deal, correct a little” a quote he borrowed from Pope John XXIII for dealing with grammar instruction and students’ papers (15). He read the paper all the way through, then read it again. He chose one or two errors to help the student correct, rather than tackle every error in the piece, missing the content. Hagemann (78) read a draft first, responding only to content, and in reading the second draft she underlined grammatical or mechanical errors. I liked that idea, but how could I find the time to read each draft twice?

**Sharing/publishing:** I will need to work harder on taking my students’ writing outside the classroom. As I become a more experienced teacher of writing, I will work to help my students feel more comfortable as writers. Once they believe in themselves and see themselves as writers, as Pat Reneau stresses with her seventh grade students (Solley 83), our writing will become more public. Very few students published their work last year, although they did tackle some issues close to their hearts, which is more important to me. One of my students wrote a letter to the editor of the local paper, and although it didn’t get printed, he did get a lengthy response. Several of my students won local poetry and creative writing contests. I will continue to seek more of those opportunities for my students. I also wanted to help my students make their writing more authentic, helping them to see the necessity of communicating thoughts and feelings in writing in order to be prepared for life (Solley 31). We wrote letters to friends, family members, and authors, and we wrote editorials, but I plan to continue to make our writing more public, in order to make it more
meaningful and encourage improvement, because outside audiences forced us to pay more attention to our writing.

An important element of the writers' workshop got lost. I've spent some time reflecting on how to set aside time to reinstate whole group sharing. Because I didn't share my own writing, I only had a few students in the class who wanted to read theirs. They did, but we didn't get the variety that would have given them the opportunity to listen with a writer's ear. Of my three sections, only one section of students grew in their ability to give helpful feedback in a whole group setting, because they had had more practice. This section met at the end of the day, often after a vigorous physical education class, and they had trouble settling down. They were a vocal group, and they found it easier to focus on improving their writing by reading it aloud. Several of the students in this section were excited about their pieces and wanted to share regularly. This inspired other students to read aloud. The other two sections had a very different group dynamic; they met at the beginning of the day, and the sections were made up of quieter students. Regardless, I needed to give those opportunities to each section; we missed some opportunities.

Research shows there are several ways teachers incorporate this element into their workshop. Virginia Wadleigh allows ten minutes at the end of every writers' workshop for group sharing time (Solley 102), and Debbie Hurst-Seigfried plans for group sharing time twice a week (Solley 45). Suze Gilbert ends with sharing time, but often has her students share a particular topic or problem because there isn't enough time to share the whole piece. However, children benefit by receiving help from one another (Solley 60). I needed to incorporate the time to celebrate the success of my student's progress and allow time to learn from each other's writing. Twice a week would work well in my
classroom.

In addition to deciding how to implement the traditional elements of the writers’ workshop, I found myself encountering other questions. How much violence should I allow students to write? How should I grade and evaluate students? How should I teach grammar? These issues are explored below.

**How much violence should I allow students to write?**

I have always thought it is more difficult to be creative than gory, and I challenged my students to spill little blood. The problem is that some of my students like R. L. Stine and often want to write in his style. As a reading teacher, I have always tried to get my horror fans turned on to other authors or genres; I have even banned Stine books from required reading assignments in order to get students to read new authors. Students have responded by expanding their reading lists and grudgingly admitting that they enjoyed their time away from R.L. Stine and Christopher Pike. However, because in the past I didn’t focus on writing, I never made the connection between what they were reading and what they would want to express on paper in their own creative endeavors.

Alex read only R.L. Stine at the beginning of the year, but was introduced to Michael Crichton. He began to appreciate the skill of suspense and worked to incorporate it in his writing. However, for most students, it wasn’t this easy. As Michael Andersen states (224), violence in the media is very much a part of boys’ lives. He allowed violent writing in his classroom for several reasons. Writing about violence could be a cry for help, a way to process what scares them, or an opportunity to express aggression and violence in healthy ways (Andersen 228). He argued that they were writing about what they cared about and knew, which made them better writers (Andersen 229). He believed that
their drafts were a good place to begin the conversations about the writing craft, and that we must look for value in all types of writing (Andersen 230).

Students’ drafts are certainly a good place to start talking about writing, and for some students a good place to start putting words to paper. If a student is reluctant to write, I would rather have him pen a violent story than nothing at all. At least then I can get a sense of the type of writing a student does and of the student himself. The best answer, though, is to work to find authors that will inspire good writing because authors serve as writing models.

**How do I grade or evaluate students’ work?**

Seventh graders don’t come to the classroom on an equal playing field. I was tired of grading struggling, low ability students the same as everyone else. I was excited about students only competing against themselves, giving them a chance to be successful by working with passion on what was important to them. Atwell stated it well:

> Nontracked workshops work. Instead of accommodating one ability level and one level of instructional activity, heterogeneous workshops represent the whole range of middle school abilities, attitudes, and intentions. There are as many teachers in a workshop as there are students. Everyone learns from everybody, and our less able students may learn most and best of all” (Atwell 80).

In our district, I need to have grades to send out progress reports every three weeks and a nine week grade to place on the report card. This past year, my students were given responsibility points, points for spelling, points for writing the required rough draft pages, and points for turning in three finished pieces every nine weeks. These pieces were scored in three separate ways: they were given a participation grade based on work habits, a score on mechanics, and a score for doing the pieces. We had other assignments that were graded, but I kept the scores in English class to a minimum. The students kept folders of their
work in the room, I kept a chart of conference information and a rough draft chart, and later in the year, we kept a genre chart, so I could easily research what every child was working on and had accomplished. Giving my students more responsibility was good for everyone in the classroom.

I also had my students write letters twice a quarter to their parents. These letters kept parents updated on what was happening in the classroom. The letter included the student’s current grade, because that was most important to parents. Also included were some areas in which the student was doing well. If a grade was not where a student wanted it to be, some things that could be done individually to bring the letter grade up were stated as goals. The students were asked to bring in a short note written by their parent to confirm the parent had read the letter. The letter needed to be turned into the basket by the end of that week. It was touching to read the parents’ encouraging notes to their children, and it relieved some of the responsibility because the parents knew exactly what their children were working on in the classroom and how they could support their children at home. I needed the help. I couldn’t do it all in the short time I saw these students daily.

Evaluation in the writing workshop was considered a tough issue, and teachers tackled this problem in many different ways. Marian Allender (Grading 80) based a nine week grade on work completed and progress toward meeting personal goals in conjunction with a conference with each student. Suzanne Price (Grading 80) placed a letter grade, based on a judgment grid, a conference, and a revision checklist, on one “Masterpiece” each nine weeks, and that piece later was inserted into a portfolio. Lorraine Cella (Grading 81) used “choose your own grade” as her method of grading written responses to novels. Set objectives were given by Marty Brewster for each writing assignment
J. Harvey Maycomber required revision of five drafted papers and students worked at their own ability level and competed only with themselves (Grading 82). Research suggested many possibilities; I just need to find methods that would work in my classroom. I would like to get students more involved in the process. I would like to hear their input regarding the goals they have set and grade them based on effort and improvement, but the record keeping seems staggering. Student evaluation has value. I have used that in the past. Still, I am working through this issue.

**How should I teach grammar?**

Teaching writing scared me. I do not consider myself a writer. At one time in my own schooling, words came easily. In fact, a favorite high school English teacher suggested that I consider a career that involved writing. But how could I teach something I did not do? And grammar rules? Eighth grade English class was 15 years ago, and though I felt I had a fairly good grasp of the basic rules, I did not feel comfortable teaching this class. I know this age group, and they have not been shy about expressing their opinions: “English is borrrring!” I agreed, grammar is boring, and I didn’t want to spend half of my day hating my job, with my students dreading my class. At the same time, I know that grammar is important for future success. Effective writing and standardized tests mandate that students know the writing rules and conventions. I have spent six years of Sundays grading student papers and I know that student errors matter, because they influence how readers view them and what they have to say (Hagemann 74).

The English curriculum that I inherited consisted of a ragged Houghton Mifflin Grammar and Composition textbook from 1984 and a classroom set of Write Source 2000 books. I intended to use the textbook as a source for mini-
lessons, rather than teaching directly from the book. However, my mini-lessons often turned into spending approximately the first ten minutes of several class periods per week reviewing rules, despite the fact that I knew better. I also was aware of my students' tolerance level, so I didn't spend extended time in Grammar and Composition. Instead, I tried to teach the rules using student writing whenever possible. I knew, as Doniger (101) pointed out, that I had to be careful not to fall into the old "drill and kill" traditional grammar lessons. Instead, we should use student writing itself as the lesson material, adding extra examples when necessary. "It is imperative that I keep Roger Fowler's injunction in mind that an 'interpretation ... is easier to grasp through examples than to discuss abstractly'" (Doniger, 101). Hagemann (79) believed that "The best writing curriculum... is one that balances content and form, that calls for an attention to writing process and to written product, that draws on knowledge from both teacher and student. There's a need for both form and content in the writing workshop."

After spending a year reacquainting myself with grammar rules and the writing process and product, I have learned not to take language so seriously. Carroll (106) gave three reasons why teachers should spend some time having fun with language. She believed that when students are entertained by language, the were more likely to find the serious aspects "palatable." We will be more conditioned to find language curiosities everywhere when we pay more attention to written and oral language, and my enthusiasm and light-heartedness will be contagious among my students. I found this to be true; my students loved playing dictionary games, playing with parts of speech, homonyms, and synonyms and antonyms. They came alive when they were allowed to play, and they were having so much fun, they forgot they were
learning. They remembered the fun and weren’t scared to use what they learned in their writing. “Currently, many teachers are confused and intimidated by the complexities of grammar” (Vavra 89). I am not alone. Last year, I was intimidated. This year, I will go into my classroom feeling a lot more comfortable and far more confident.

Sams (64) stated,

What needs to be done to teach students to write is clear. We need to align our instruction more closely with the tasks students face when composing and reading, by including practice in analyzing relationships between words, phrases, clauses, sentences, paragraphs, sections, and the work as a whole. We need to reinforce their understanding of those relationships through extensive reading, writing, and informed revising.

I will no longer go through the dilapidated textbook page by page; rather I will attend to the students’ needs through reading and writing. I have observed my students. I have read their writing. I know where they need additional support and assistance. I know where the mini-lessons will help the students most. I also know that I will need to pull aside smaller groups of students and help students on an individual basis with concepts that are difficult for them. A year “in the trenches” and hours of additional reading and studying helped me to understand what needs to be done to help students achieve good writing. Students use these rules in their writing, so it makes sense that they learn them from their writing. They didn’t learn the rules of commas by doing exercises from the book; I continued to encounter the same mistakes in the pieces I read. The research isn’t wrong, and just because I felt most comfortable teaching that way, textbook exercises are not how students learn. A year of working with my students, observing, and learning from them has taught me how they learn.

Successes
This was a challenging year for me. My students and I worked hard. Despite the new class load, the questions, and the self-doubt, I feel like a more effective teacher. My students are better writers and value reading more than they did at the beginning of the year. The year-end surveys showed they made connections between their reading and writing. Carrie said, "I found the more I write, the better I read," and Rick commented, "If I read a lot, I can write better." My seventh graders wrote cartoons, short stories, poems, plays, editorials, essays, career research papers, mother's day tributes, newspaper articles, autobiographies and more. They wrote more than they ever have, and they learned from their pieces. Students who didn't consider themselves readers and writers do now. Mark and Clark were two examples. They developed the habits of readers and writers. Their writing improved throughout the year. Their standardized test scores remained high.

In April and May, the students in each section joined together to produce a writing showcase. Students carefully edited their pieces, then submitted them to the folder. They took pride in their work and wanted their pieces to be the best they could, because they were going to be read by others who have a good sense of writing (Harwayne 57). In groups, students read to discover good writing, they selected the pieces that went into the class volume, and they worked on editing. They had fun creating titles, "The Power of 8th Hour" and "Seventh Grade Tales." The "Tales" were beautifully illustrated and contained a play on words. The artists of the group illustrated the table of contents and the stories and the poems. First Hour Class got creative with the digital camera and featured all the authors presented in the book. It was an inspiring way to end the school year, and I am proud of the part each student played in putting this work together. It showcased how far they had come over the course of the past nine
months, and it validated my switch to the reading and writing workshop.

At the beginning of the year, teaching English scared me to death. Now I can't imagine teaching seventh grade literature without the seventh grade writing class; there are too many connections; it is too important. There is still so much I want to learn about reading and writing: so many books and stories and poems I want to pull as examples for my students in the fall, so much I want to research about different genres and authors. First year teacher, Emily Pauly, reminded me that patience is a necessity. Teachers want to learn everything right now, yet it's impossible. It takes time, reading, and experimenting to get it right. (Pauly 287) I can't perfect the reading and writing workshop in one year, but I have learned and will continue to learn so that my students will benefit next year. I have taken a step in the right direction.

I continue to pave it- through writing and reading about writing, through uncovering and questioning my assumptions, through observing my kids and myself in action and trying to make sense of my observations, through dumb mistakes, uncertain experiments, and, underneath it all, a desire to do my best by students and a willingness to acknowledge that my definition of best will be - and should be - ever changing. (Atwell 4).

As a teacher, I have stretched my boundaries, taken a step into the unknown, felt more productive, and had more fun than I ever have in my teaching career. My students were creative, intelligent, funny, and the writing workshop celebrated all their unique qualities. More importantly, the writing workshop produced results. My students became better writers, and I became a better teacher.
Works Cited


