

2000

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Ryan, Julie, "Writers workshop in a second grade classroom" (2000). *Graduate Research Papers*. 1423.
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Abstract

A writers workshop consists of peer and teacher interaction in assigned small groups. For this project, a writers workshop was implemented in a second grade classroom. A print-rich environment and a careful introduction to the components of the writing process were the basis of the program. Students were offered a continuous and predictable workshop schedule. Guidance was given in the form of student-teacher conferences, mini-lessons and the introduction of many genres of writing.

Writers Workshop in a Second Grade Classroom

A Graduate Paper: A Journal Article

Submitted to the

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by

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May 2000

Abstract

A writers workshop is an important part of the language arts program in elementary classrooms. It consists of peer and teacher interaction in assigned small groups. Students are actively involved in the writing process (selecting a topic, writing a draft, redrafting, revising, and publishing). As children engage in the recursive writing process, they enhance the comprehension-composition connection. A print-rich environment that offers content and models of language can encourage students to create meaning through writing.

For this project, a writers workshop was implemented in a second grade classroom. A print-rich environment and a careful introduction to the components of the writing process were the basis of the program. Students were offered a continuous and predictable workshop schedule. Guidance was given in the form of student-teacher conferences, mini-lessons and the introduction of many genres of writing.

An exciting change is occurring in many elementary classrooms today. Writing is becoming an important part of the way we help children become literate. In the past, language arts programs were not surveyed to make sure they encouraged children's involvement in the writing process. Educators are now taking seriously the part writing plays in children's emerging literacy (Morrow, 1997).

Writing Programs in the Past

Many teachers in the past believed that writing could be done once a week with an assigned topic and a small allotment of time. The children's papers were collected at the end of the period and were viewed as completed. In assessing these pieces, form was frequently emphasized as much or more as meaning (Calkins, 1985).

Teachers' view of writing experiences for children reflected their school experiences and the lack of attention to writing in undergraduate teacher education programs. This neglect of writing was also characteristic of inservice programs for teachers. Both preservice and inservice attention to the language arts primarily focused on reading (Graves, 1994).

Writing as a Process and Children's Emerging Literacy

Writing currently is considered a process to create meaning. The comprehension process (listening and reading) and the composition process (speaking and writing) are closely related. Instruction in either one nurtures the other (Galda, Cullinan, & Strickland, 1997).

The lack of emphasis on the process of writing may also have been due to the fact that educators have believed that writing abilities developed only after reading abilities emerged. It is now recognized that a rapid development in writing abilities occur from the ages of two through eight. For many children, their interest in writing begins with scribbling at a very young age. Human beings seem to have an innate need to write (Morrow, 1997).

Children's knowledge of language begins early in life. Their emerging literacy, in terms of written language, depends a great deal on being involved in the reading and writing activities of the more literate adults around them (Teale, 1982). If surrounded by environmental print, children soon learn that written language has meaning. They begin to test hypotheses; therefore, learning takes place naturally (Smith, 1994). Learning to write should come as easily to a child as learning to speak (Goodman, 1986).

Teachers are now realizing that students begin their school years with some knowledge of the functions of language, an inborn interest in writing, and a need to express themselves (Butler & Turbill, 1987).

Value of Writers Workshop

Children benefit from teacher instruction but also from interacting in small assigned groups, or writers workshops. These groups can begin in

grade two as children develop intellectually and socially. Such growth allows children to see the writing process as recursive rather than linear; thus, interaction with others can not only promote selection of topics and drafting but redrafting, revising and publishing (Calkins, 1983).

During a writing workshop, many different literacy activities can occur simultaneously. Students and teachers are working together to become better writers (Galda, Cullinan, & Strickland, 1997). A spirit of cooperation exists among a community of workers who are all striving toward the same goal (Graves, 1983).

The benefits of involving children in a writing workshop are numerous: The workshop offers a block of time in which students have time to think, plan, write, reflect and talk. They have the freedom to go back and forth between the components of writing (Graves, 1994).

Within the structure of a writers workshop, children can choose their topics rather than having them assigned. Then, children can write about experiences that are meaningful to them, usually their own experiences. When children write about what they know, their voice shines through (Graves, 1983).

As children engage in creating meaning through writing and interact concerning their writing with others in a writers workshop, they have a genuine reason for learning conventions. They begin to understand that

conventions are tools that will help readers understand their writing (Graves, 1994).

Since it is difficult to separate a reading workshop from a writing workshop, students' reading abilities are developed while writing. Children use what they have learned from reading to write and what they have learned from writing to read (Morrow, 1997).

Implementing a Writers Workshop

In order for a successful writers workshop to be implemented, several important understandings must be considered: Writing needs to be recognized as a process, not a product. For children in grade two and above, the writing process is recursive not linear. Writers move back and forth among the components of writing in a recursive process. The components are not steps (Calkins, 1983). When writing is thought of as steps, children's flexibility in creating meaning through this process is thwarted (Labbo, Hoffman, & Roser, 1995).

The learning environment needs to nurture children's engagement in the writing process. Large, uninterrupted blocks of time are needed for writing at least four days a week (Graves, 1994). Writing workshops must be a continuous and predictable part of the class schedule in order for children to achieve meaning in the process of writing. Then, students can be energized to write (Calkins, 1983).

Although a writers workshop may appear unstructured to an uninformed observer, much planning goes into a well functioning workshop. Guidelines are established through conversations between students and teacher, and boundaries for responses and routines that create a positive working environment are practiced. Routines may be adjusted as needed, but students work best within a predictable setting (Graves, 1994).

The classroom teacher needs to work with each workshop, or small group, modeling the writing process and its components (selecting a topic, writing a draft, redrafting, revising, and publishing). The students need to view the teacher as a writer (Galda, Cullinan, & Strickland, 1997).

Teachers as listeners contribute much to children's writing programs. A genuine interest needs to be taken in each child's work. Encouraging students to talk about their topics helps the teacher understand what children know. The role of the learner applies as much to the classroom teacher as to each student (Avery, 1992).

During the writing time, interaction among students, and sometimes the teacher, is essential. Students need the opportunity to share thoughts and ideas. Writing time does not need to be a silent time; often there are legitimate reasons to speak (Albert, 1976).

To support writing, children need to be immersed in print. The more they read and write, the better readers and writers they will become (Smith, 1983).

Implementation of a Writers Workshop in Second Grade

As a second grade teacher, I began the school year with a major goal: to develop a writing program that would energize children to find meaning through the process of writing. Even though seven and eight year old children are generally eager to learn, their thinking-language abilities can be extended through a print-rich learning environment that encourages writing and offers opportunities for sharing pieces and reacting to them. Many different learning experiences were provided – teacher-directed instruction; small group, or workshop sessions; and individual activities. This writing program was scheduled for thirty to forty minutes four to five times each week. A print-rich learning environment supported the program. The components of writing as a recursive process were carefully introduced. I worked with each small group to develop an understanding of responses that would promote their writing ability as well as others.

Establishing a Print-Rich Environment

First, I began to establish a print-rich learning environment. For example, poems written on chart paper and illustrated by the students

were shared and displayed around the room. Daily news was recorded on chart paper and posted on the news board. At the end of each month, the news was made into a big book and added to our classroom library.

Sustaining Centers

To further provide a print-rich learning environment, sustaining centers, such as a listening/reading center, poetry center, author/illustrator center, and interesting objects center were introduced as part of the literature-based language arts program. These centers supported the children's writing as models of language and content. They also supported a secure, predictable learning environment. Their contents reflected the units being studied. For example, during a unit on nature, the poetry center consisted of a collection of poems about plants and animals. Students read the poetry individually and in small groups. The children were encouraged to share the poems orally. This sustaining center was a successful way to introduce the poetry genre and was the beginning of many students' interest in writing poetry.

Webbing

Another part of the learning environment was the construction of webs. These visual displays of concepts and related vocabulary showed the relationships among people and objects. For example, as the class listened as I read aloud the story of Stuart Little, by E.B. White, they created a web

showing Stuart's actions and feelings. The story was extended through student responses, and story elements, such as characters, setting, and problems, were better understood with the web as a visual representation. Two of my students were inspired to write new chapters for Stuart's adventures.

Language Charts

Language charts were also an important part of a print-rich environment. Students' thoughts and ideas were recorded on large sheets of paper and displayed in the classroom. The charts enabled the children to reflect on their responses created as a group. After reading Cloudy With A Chance of Meatballs, by Judi Barrett, the class recorded the advantages and disadvantages of having food fall from the sky. Students were able to see the transformation from oral to written language.

Ways to Support and Organize Children's Writing

To prepare for writers workshop, each child was given materials to support their writing. Two spiral notebooks were provided for each child. One was used as a journal and the other as a learning log. The children recorded their thoughts and feelings in their journals. No topics were assigned for journal writing. The learning logs were often used to connect

the content areas. In science class, for example, the children wrote their predictions and recorded data from their observations.

Students were also given folders in which to store work-in-progress and finished pieces. Pocket folders kept in the students' desk contained writings that were unfinished. Folders labeled with the students' names and placed alphabetically in a movable cart were used to store finished work.

The writing folder for unfinished work was also used for support items, such as a mini-dictionary and spelling Try-It! sheets. The mini-dictionary provided commonly used words and spaces to write in other words needed by individual students. Students also had the option of trying an unknown word on a Try-It! sheet and then checking with a friend or the teacher for the correct spelling.

Other supports for writing included different types and sizes of writing paper; the classroom library consisting of fiction, nonfiction and reference books; and four computers that could be used as sources of information or a way to publish work.

Introduction of the Writing Process

In order for my writing workshop to be successful, a careful introduction to the components of the recursive writing process was necessary. Children also needed to recognize that everyone can be an author.

Selecting Topics

The children needed to become aware of ways to find topics. I modeled, by thinking aloud, how I found topics. These topics were important to me just as they should consider topics from their experiences. My list was displayed for them to view. Students were then given time to compose a list of ideas that they might want to write about. I explained that their list-making could be ongoing as they had school and out-of-school experiences. The topic lists were put in the students' individual writing folders. The children were then asked to select a topic from their lists. After a few minutes of thinking time, I wrote with the students without interruption for approximately ten minutes.

Drafting

The next day we began our workshop time with a discussion of the writing process. I wanted the children to understand that even though there is a pattern of selecting, composing, and reading when writing, each child would not be engaging in the same component at the same time.

We discussed ways of rehearsing or getting started with a topic. I explained that they could prepare for writing by drawing, collecting information, browsing or listening/reading in the sustaining centers or the school library, or even talking with a friend. Students at first were encouraged to get their ideas down on paper in the form of drafts and

redrafts. The focus should be on their ideas. As they wrote, they would be continually reading what they had written.

Redrafting and Revising

Although much of what children wrote did not need to be revised, some pieces of work were chosen for revision. The children attended to improving meaning (redrafting) and their use of form elements (revising). Second graders are often more concerned with getting something written down and then being finished rather than being concerned about the quality of their work. In order to move away from this approach to writing, students needed to begin viewing writing as a recursive process.

Children needed to reread their writing. I encouraged rereading by modeling it with my own writing. Students also read their writing aloud to a partner. My students were often surprised by what they had written when they heard themselves read it aloud.

Publishing

During writers workshop, students were asked to select pieces of work that were important to them for publication. The children were allowed to choose from several methods of publishing.

Some students chose to share their work orally. The author's chair was available for those who wished to share their writing with the whole class. After reading a piece, the author had the opportunity to ask others to

respond to the piece of work. Some students preferred to read to only one person. In this case, the author invited a classmate to the side of the room (away from the area where writing was occurring) and read to them quietly. Students also had the option of reading to people outside of the classroom. Other listeners included the principal, the school secretary, former teachers, and parents.

Using the computer was a popular form of publication. The children signed their names to a waiting list to use one of the four computers. After their writing was printed, the children received two copies. One was filed in their folder for finished work. The other could be taken home or given away.

Bookmaking was another form of publishing that was available to students. Several ways to make books were demonstrated, and supplies were always on hand for this activity. Children showed pride in their books and often shared them with their friends. Besides the individual books that students made, class books were put together with works of a common theme. For example, during the winter, a snowfall inspired poem writing about snow. These poems were bound together for reading in the classroom.

Bulletin board displays also showcased completed works. These were shown with pride to visitors during Open House and Grandparents' Day.

Guidance of the Writing Process

I supported children in the writing process through conferencing, mini-lessons, and the introduction of many types of writing.

Conferencing

During individual conferences, I guided the students through the writing process. My most important role was that of a listener. By listening to the students, I learned about the thinking processes my students were using, and at times, witnessed children solving their own problems by talking aloud. I learned the value of patience by waiting for children to speak during a conference and often discovered that our topic would not be what I had in mind. The children led me in the direction they needed to go.

The questions that were the most successful in encouraging children to talk about writing during our conferences were simple ones. Examples are:

1. How is it going?
2. Tell me about your new topic.
3. What are you going to do next?
4. What is the best part of this piece?

I also conferenced with students who were ready to publish a piece of writing. This was an ideal time to teach specific form elements. The children were asked to come to the conference with questions they had about spelling, punctuation, capitalization and other elements. After

answering questions, I chose an area that needed instruction to focus on. Conferencing gave my students opportunities to improve their reading, speaking, and listening abilities along with their writing.

Mini-Lessons

Students were also guided through the writing process with the presentation of mini-lessons. Writers workshop often began with a ten to fifteen minute session dealing with a specific problem involving a component or form element. Example topics were introducing quality literature as models, to recognizing story elements, and using conventions that help a reader understand what has been written.

For one mini-lesson, I asked each child to bring a favorite book to the session. The children were asked to think about where the author got the idea for the book. During our discussion, many possibilities for finding topics were suggested. Children offered ideas, such as write about something you love, tell about something that has happened to you, teach an important lesson, and show how others should be treated. The suggestions were recorded on a chart for future reference.

Another mini-lesson introduced the meaning of conventions. I displayed a piece of my writing and asked the children to read it carefully. I asked them to tell me some things that I knew how to do when writing. What things helped make my writing readable? One child offered that I knew how to spell. Another mentioned the use of periods. Soon we had a long list of the conventions that I had demonstrated.

Next, each student chose a piece of writing to examine. I asked them to identify conventions that they were using in their writing. I helped them get started by suggesting that every one of them knew how to write from left to right across the paper. Each person was able to find some things that they knew how to do. We added the lists of conventions to our writing folders so that they could be added to at a later date.

When students seemed to need help getting started with a topic, I conducted a mini-lesson about lead-ins. I wrote a paragraph about my pet rabbit on the board and then thought aloud about not being satisfied with my opening sentence. I tried several new beginnings until I found one that was the most interesting. On another day, this mini-lesson was extended by reading aloud the beginning sentences from some of our favorite books. We compared them and discussed why we liked some better than others. I asked the children to be aware of the lead-ins authors used during their independent reading.

Introduction to Many Kinds of Writing

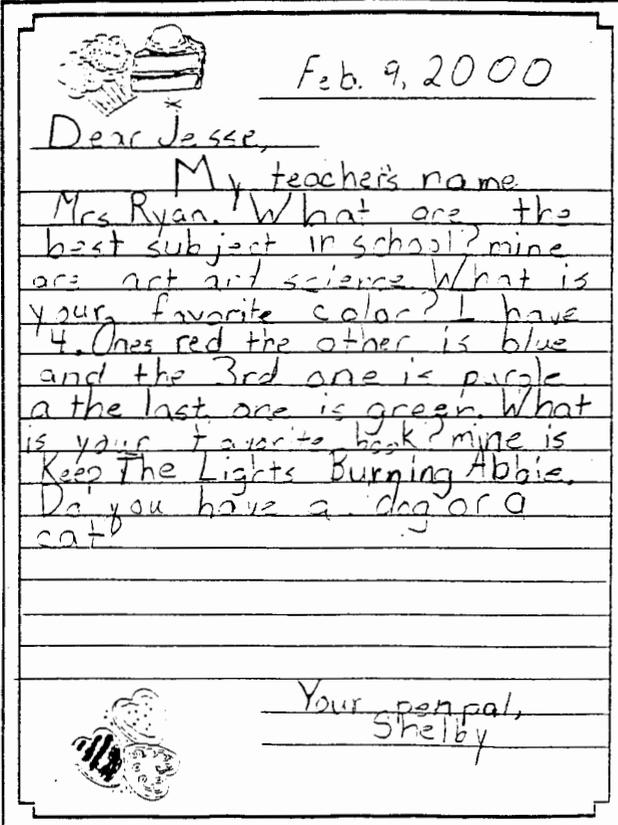
One of my most important roles while guiding children through the writing process was to introduce them to many forms of writing. I was pleased with the quantity of writing my students were producing but became concerned when children seemed to be using the same form over and over. Then, I began to offer ideas to extent their options for writing.

Letter writing. This activity was a required part of our curriculum. I wanted to teach it in a meaningful way so our class became pen pals with

another second grade class. This activity was a great success! Students eagerly anticipated each letter and wrote back with enthusiasm (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Pen Pal Letter



Feb. 9, 2000

Dear Jesse,

My teacher's name
Mrs Ryan. What are the
best subject in school? mine
are art and science. What is
your favorite color? I have
4. One's red the other is blue
and the 3rd one is purple
a the last one is green. What
is your favorite book? mine is
Keep The Lights Burning Abbie.
Do you have a dog or a
cat?

Your pen pal,
Shelby

Students were also encouraged to write letters to friends and relatives.

This experience gave the children additional writing practice and offered them a real purpose for writing (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Letter To Teacher

Feb. 22, 2000

Dear Mrs. Ryan,
 Yesterday I went to the
 dentist. I had no cavads.
 I had to put something in
 in my mouth. I could not
 eat for a power. They
 clend my theoth.

Your friend,
 C. hacc

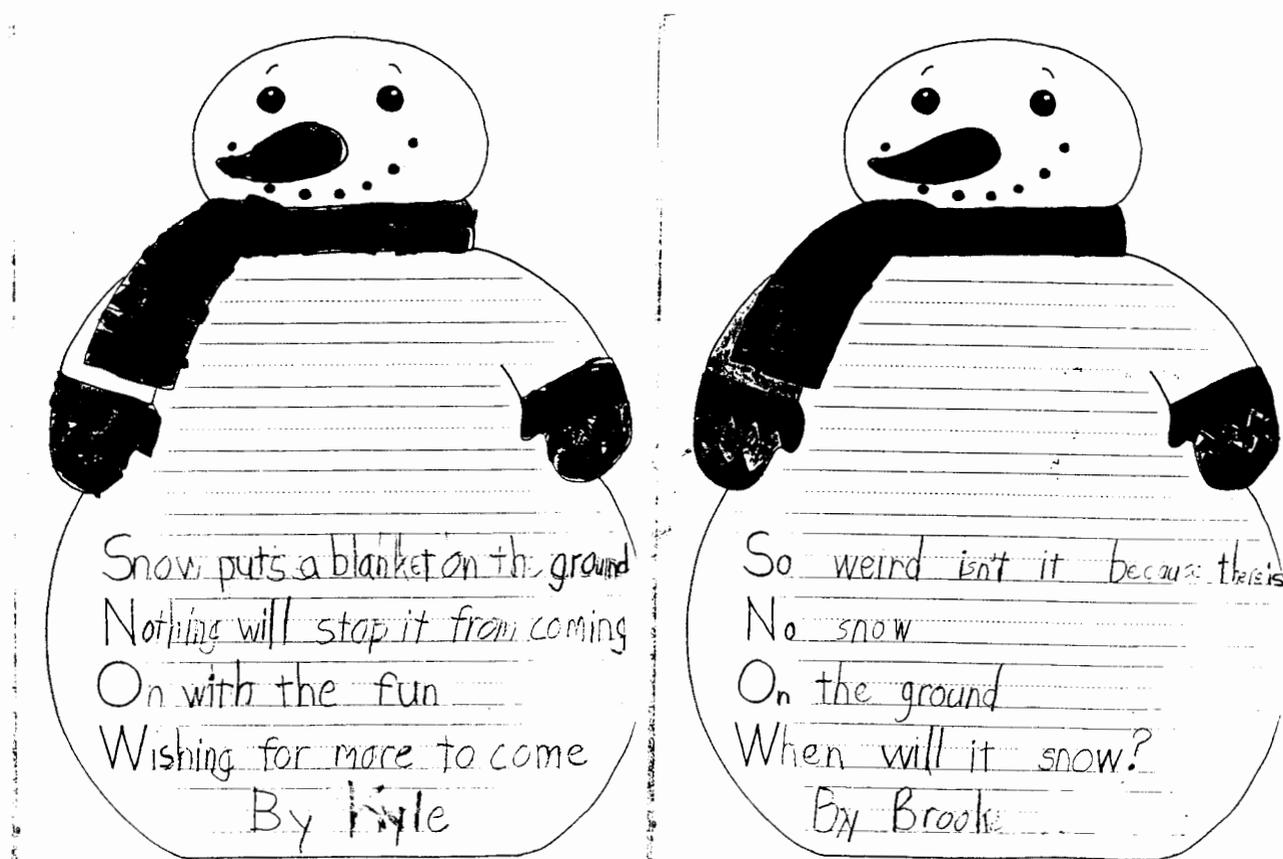
Poetry writing. My students had been reading and enjoying poetry since the beginning of the school year. To introduce poetry writing, I shared poems that were written by former students of mine. They discussed some of the elements of these poems and compared them to their poems. The students began to notice such elements as rhythm, rhyme, repetition, and form.

One snowy day I shared some acrostic poems with the children. I explained that the subject of the poem is also the title and that each letter in the title begins a new line of the poem. The students were eager to experiment with writing acrostic poems. Many poems about snow were

written that day. In the days following, they showed me poems about many aspects of winter. Acrostic poetry was a successful introduction to poetry writing (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Snow Poems



Literary responses. Students were asked to respond through writing to literature experiences. After listening to the teacher read aloud a chapter of Stuart Little, by E.B. White, the students were asked to write what they were thinking about during the story. Such responses gave me insight into the meaning they had created. Their written responses were in the form of questions, summaries, and reviews. Many students retold favorite parts (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

Literature Responses

Shelby

Stuart Little
By E.B. White

I wonder if he finds Marglow. I like when he makes a bow and arrow and shoots Snowbell in the ear. I wonder if he finds his way back home.

Stuat little

By E. B. White

3-17-00 I think Stuart will find Margolow sooner or later. My favorite part of this story was when Stuart was in the race. And it was sad to know that Stuart's evening got runned because of the boys.

Emily

During a folk tale unit, a discussion was conducted about how folk tales have been retold by different authors and changed a little each time to reflect the author's voice. After a lesson on the elements of folk tales, students were given the opportunity to write one of their own. Much to my surprise, one student focused on the idea of retelling someone else's story and presented his version of Barn Dance, by Bill Martin, Jr. and John Archambault (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

Retelling**Barn Dance**

One Halloween night a scarecrow was yelling that all the farm animals must come to a barn yard hoedown. The skinny kid snuck in with the herd. And the scarecrow told everybody to grab a partener and jump right in so everybody grabed a partener and jumped right in. The scarecrow saw the skinny kid and told him to show the cows how to boogie. But until the owl said mornig comming so the skinny kid got back in the house before the old hound dog woke up and he got in the house and he went thur the kithin and went up the stairs and went to his bedroom and layed on his bed.

Retold by Kyle

Conclusion

Implementing a writers workshop in my classroom was a positive and successful experience. My students and I grew as learners and writers. By offering them a print-rich environment and presenting them with quality literature, I encouraged the children to be enthusiastic writers. They became risk-takers as the year progressed, and I observed much growth.

My belief that conventions are best learned in context was confirmed. Helping children revise and edit a piece of writing that was important to

them enabled me to understand what they knew. Children learned what was necessary and appropriate for their piece of writing.

I believe the time my students spent writing was one of the most valuable parts of their school day. I observed them connecting reading and writing, and most importantly, viewing themselves as authors.

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