Growing Writers:  
Considering Talk, Time, Models, and Purpose

Renee Webster

Reading the new picture book, There is a Flower at the Tip of My Nose Smelling Me, by Alice Walker, I was struck by her invitation to wonder; to think of myself in the world with new eyes. Similarly, my teaching assignment last year offered me the unique opportunity to view elementary writers in a fresh-new-light ... teaching my own class of first graders for three hours each day, while spending the other three hours supporting literacy learning in three kindergarten classrooms and three second-grade rooms, as a Title One teacher. Standing on the shoulders of great writing teacher researchers: Lucy Calkins, Katie Wood Ray, Shelley Harwayne, and many others, I began to look at my teaching of writing with entirely new eyes – altering everything I did with my youngest writers - from planning, guiding my writing workshop mini-lessons, conferring, responding to students, developing whole units of study, and assessing. The opportunity to teach the same craft or writing strategy multiple times with different primary-aged groups helped me re-see and redefine my teaching of writing. I noticed that it didn’t matter whether the writers were kindergarten, first grade, or second grade students. It didn’t matter in which classroom I was teaching. It didn’t matter if it was in the morning or afternoon. What did matter was empowering each student to noticed a technique an author used that made him or her love the author’s writing. What mattered was supporting students by having them “write their stories in the air,” in other words, giving their story and the technique they had just discovered life, by orally sharing their pieces. It mattered that I acknowledged their specific accomplishment, and provided additional scaffolds if necessary, before ever having students start writing on their own.

In previous years, I struggled with the dilemma that even when I had my young writers composing daily, the quality of their writing did not advance as I would expect. Students’ spelling improved. They were better punctuators. Their pieces grew longer. The predicament seemed to be how to transform their flat, voiceless, pieces written just to get something on paper, so they could tell their teacher that they were done, to writing with their own intentions and purposes.

Katie Wood Ray, in her book Wondrous Words helped me change my focus to teaching the writer, instead of the writing. Rather than only looking at students’ writing, or approaching the
teaching of writing through a formulaic system of skills and subskills; one of the things I did, was to work with students to call attention to, and name, the author's craft they noticed in the wonderful picture books I was already sharing, as a daily part of our reading and content area studies. This revolutionized my writing curriculum, as I found I could talk about what writers do when I was teaching science, social studies, reading, and even math. I would read Joanne Ryder's wonderful book, *When the Woods Hum* to teach my first graders about life cycles, and then turn around and read the same text again inviting students to notice the leads, ending, alliteration, rhythm, echoing phrases, or other author's crafts the writer had used in the text. In addition, we would discuss why we thought the author made the choices he or she did in regards to craft.

Modeling for my young students how to read as a writer spilled into all their writing. For example, a favorite mentor text was Marla Frazee’s picture book, *Roller Coaster*. While reading this book, students pointed out how her line breaks, punctuation, and her word placements added to their enjoyment of the story. They were excited to see how she used dashes to s-t-r-e-t-c-h out a word and slow down the reading. They all wanted to try using sound words like her, “Clickity, clackity, Clickity, clackity” ... of the roller coaster climbing up the ride. Even more they loved the ellipses ... her suspenseful pauses, and could not wait to try them out in their stories. Marla Frazee had shown my students that a writer punctuates in a certain way ... so that the reader reads the story in the way that the author intends it to be read. It was after our study of *Roller Coaster* that punctuation became important to my first and second graders, leaving the editing section of the writing process, becoming part of how they revised their writing for meaning and audience. My first and second graders took control of punctuating their stories with new purpose, as they had their audience in mind, as illustrated in Conrad and Bryan’s pieces.

**Winter Festival**

**By Conrad**

I was going to Perry's Winter Fest.  
We went farther than...  
my Mom and Dad and my aunt and cousin.  
We stopped to eat some pizza. My sister got juice and I got pop. I sat at the ledge of the wall.  
We walked some more and my Mom stopped to buy some jewelry.  
I saw a lot of people. I did not talk because I felt excited.  
I went e-v-e-r-y-w-h-e-r-e with my Mommy.  
Then we walked home. I felt very excited from all that...  
fun.
My Headache
By Bryan

I had a headache. It was like my head was pounding fast and then it was like my head was on fire.
And then Dallas came in …
my cat came …
my two dogs came …
I felt better.

(In figure 1, Conrad revises his Winter Festival piece to show the reader how to emphasis the reading of everywhere. The revision in Figure 2 illustrates Bryan’s desire to have the reader pause as more animals enter his story.)

As the year progressed, these youngest writers owned their stories; they brought personal intention to our writing workshop. If I hadn’t been there to see it with my own eyes, I would never have believed the degree to which these children saw themselves as writers, bringing memory stories from home to craft into pieces during writing workshop, or catching a story that occurred at school to compose into a piece to share with others. Debra Ann worked for weeks on her garden story, where she wrote how the garden was on fire. Val selected words with intention; she wanted her readers to know how she grew dancing feet when she heard wild music playing on the radio. Barry’s spring writing piece, Graveyard, (figure 3) tells his memory of “a scary time.”

The Graveyard
By Barry

One night it was super dark out. I was scared. I was feeling like I was going to die. I heard the thunder go KaBoom. It was so freaky. The lightening went Flash! The night light in my room went Zap. It shut off in a second. It’s like being in a cave when it was so dark in my room. I grabbed my stuffed animal whale and went down stairs. When I got down stairs I saw a bat flying through the air. It felt like I was in the graveyard. It was so freaky. But then …

my Dad woke up and got me and took me to his bed. I was very happy. My Dad told me a story. Then I went to bed.
Overwhelmingly, the data I collected this past year, demonstrates students’ ability to write strong pieces, rich with author’s crafts, after interacting with exemplar texts, sharing their work with peers, and facilitation by teachers that validate students’ successes, approximations, and honor their child voice. And finally, it is important to note, all this work: on author’s craft and pre-writing conversations and long periods of composing time and conferring and celebrating craft-revisions are all embedded in a writing workshop that is as rich in talking-as-an-author, as it is in writing pieces. I now see that to assist my students in their writing achievement I must help them grow as a writer, with lots of rich talk around great authors, their own purposes for writing, and time to talk through their goals for their pieces.

Renee Webster, an early elementary teacher for Perry Public Schools, may be reached at webste27@msu.edu.

Discussion Questions

1. Why did Renee describe her students’ writing as “flat, voiceless pieces?”

2. Later in the year she said that the students “owned” their writing. What do you think that means?

3. If you were to describe Renee’s implementation of writer’s workshop, how would it look?

4. Is it possible to use various methods for writing instruction at once? Which methods/programs were referenced in this essay?
Professional Resources

Walker, Alice. *There Is a Flower at the Tip of My Nose Smelling Me.* (Mentor Text)

Frazier, Marla. *Roller Coaster.* (Mentor Text)

Ryder, Joanne. *When the Woods Hum.* New .(Mentor Text)

Ray, Katie Wood. *Wondrous Words.* Drawing on stories from classrooms, examples of student writing, and illustrations, Katie Wood Ray explains in practical terms the theoretical underpinnings of how elementary and middle school students learn to write from their reading.

Lucy Calkins & Hartman, White, Pessah, Parsons, Louis, Bleichman, Mermelstein, Oxenhorn. *Units of Study K-2.* In each Unit of Study, these teacher/authors detail their goals, share the assessment rubric that guides their practice, and even provide the exact words of their teaching.