See You Next Year:  
The Writing Process in the Looping Classroom

BY ALISA DANIEL

My interest in looping, or teaching the same group of children for two consecutive years, emerged accidentally a few years ago. I had taught kindergarten for a year when I received a new assignment: first grade. On the first day, my new charges came in quietly, nervously looked around, hardly speaking a word. Most didn’t want to say good-bye to their parents. Over the ensuing days, many had a difficult time settling into school routines in my unfamiliar room, and I had to remind them over and over about our class rules. We repeatedly role played and modeled simple procedures, like how to set up their papers (name on the top right, date on the top left), and how and where to turn in homework, finished work, journals and supplies.

However, a few of the children had been with me in kindergarten the year before. From day one of first grade, those students were different.

Mark, Kristan, and Katherine entered my room with confidence and anticipation. Mark immediately began to take charge of setting things up in my classroom. Kristan, painfully shy only one year earlier, bounded in with her mom and gave me a big hug, and then proceeded to help Mark begin to set out art supplies, place morning papers on the desks and sharpen pencils. Katherine entered without her mother, explaining that she wanted to come in by herself. I was amazed at her independence.

The differences between my “old” students and my “new” ones didn’t end on the first day of school. I came to realize that I felt differently about “my kids” from last year. I automatically depended on them for help with organizing learning centers, reminding others how to follow through with completing and returning papers and supplies to the correct areas, and even tutoring the new students. Time and time again I thought, “I could be a lot further along with my teaching if my entire class were as settled and comfortable as Mark, Kristan, and Katherine.”

The second year, the children knew their classmates, their teacher, classroom procedures and expectations. This knowledge gave them extraordinary confidence on the first day of school, confidence that extended to their writing.

Two years later, after a move to another town and another first-grade class, I decided, with the agreement of the principal, to try looping with my students. I also decided, at the urging of my colleagues at the Southwest Georgia Writing Project, to document my students’ growth in writing over a two-year period. I would become a teacher-researcher.

Throughout the next two years, I collected a variety of data on my students’ progress in writing and their attitudes about looping, including survey responses, free writing, interview transcripts, responses to writing prompts and other writing activities. I also kept a teacher log for recording my ideas and concerns as I experimented with looping. I wanted to identify positive as well as negative aspects of looping for both the children, particularly in terms of their writing, and for me.

Indeed, I found many advantages of looping over traditional scheduling. As I’d predicted, I found that I had additional instructional time at the beginning of the second year, but I discovered other advantages I hadn’t considered. Because I was familiar with the students’ abilities, I was able to plan activities for the second year to address individual needs. And because the students were familiar with my writing program, I was able to progress more quickly with my writing curriculum. Looping also allowed me to observe growth in students’ writing I otherwise would have missed in the regular one-year rotation.

The students also benefited from the looping classroom. The second year, the children knew their classmates, their teacher, classroom procedures and expectations. This knowledge gave them extraordinary confidence on the first day of school, confidence that extended to their writing. They were comfortable with the writing processes we had learned the year before and were immediately willing to experiment with their writing. And, most importantly, the students forged a two-year bond with me and with one another that some children described as “family.”

More Teaching Time
On the first day of second grade, I had time that in previous years was taken up with nametags and seating charts. My students and I sat around in a circle and talked about what we had done over the summer vacation. We laughed about funny incidents
from first grade, and we rebuilt our classroom community.

We were able to start the year exactly where we had left off before the summer vacation began. The students pulled out their journals and portfolios from the previous year and reviewed their writings. We listened to old favorites, and then they chose stories that they wanted to rewrite and considered ideas for new pieces. We accomplished what would have been a month's worth of work in a couple of days.

My previous Septembers were spent modeling and gradually increasing the amount of time children spent writing. This year, however, the children went right to work on their stories. I had more time to conference with individual or small groups of children as they wrote. Instead of going over writing process basics such as prewriting exercises, I could teach advanced techniques. For example, in September I offered students examples of how to add details or images that might make a piece of writing come to life. We also discussed various leads or hooks that writers use. In the past, it took me months to get to these advanced techniques. When I used terms like "audience," "conference" or "editor," they knew immediately what I meant.

It was hard to believe that we had been away for a whole summer. Because of the familiarity with each other and the classroom, we settled easily into a comfortable routine.

I also noticed that while other classes were practicing line rules and classroom procedures, my class was enjoying one another and had only to be reminded of how we did things last year.

As I'd foreseen years ago, looping gave me extra time for writing activities that would normally have taken a back seat to beginning-of-the-year procedures.

We spent our first week of school writing poetry outdoors. As we sat out on the backless, wooden benches, the children wrote about what they saw. Jenny wrote:

My beautiful blue eyes behold:
Brown tree that had no leaves,
Black rabbit hopping on the ground,
Black butterfly in the sky,
Brown bird nest in the tree.

Jenny and the other students thrived in the freedom and creativity of this beginning of the year experience that most agreed was a lot more fun than learning from a new teacher how to head a paper.

**Individualizing**

Since I knew my first graders would be with me the next year, over the summer I was able to plan activities with their individual needs in mind. For example, Tedrick had struggled in first grade with word recognition and spelling, so during the summer I put together a pocket chart that contained pictures and words on cards grouped in pockets labeled with the letters of the alphabet. As the year began, I passed out the cards and had the children identify the pictures and words, and then I showed them how to place the cards into the chart alphabetically. Tedrick used the pocket chart frequently to help him write. He felt more secure as he wrote, and he became less frustrated with himself when he did not know how to spell words that he needed. The other children used the pocket chart as well.

Amy developed an interest in poetry in the first grade, so over the summer I purchased several different poetry books with her in mind. She especially liked the Shel Silverstein collection. I showed her that poetry did not have to rhyme and that she could make her words and phrases move around the page instead of just in straight lines.

**Birthdays**

Birthdays is....

Lots of fun with balloons, fun opening presents in the room, fun getting to pop balloons.

A second poem was written down the middle of the page.

**Water is...**

A slap on the face,
Such a mess,
Like mud outside,
Cold, and liquid,
It turns into snow in the winter,
Water turns into ice cubes in the freezer,
White rain falls like rain drops,
Helps plants grow.

Joe, a blond-haired, blue-eyed little boy, was extremely shy. Because I had had Joe in first grade, I knew about his focus on creating repetitive lists in his writing. Joe needed to learn other ways to approach an idea, and I wanted to help him. So over the summer I planned a poetry unit to demonstrate to Joe and others ways to turn lists into poetry.

For example, when asked to write about the things he saw in the outdoor classroom, Joe listed: "I saw a butterfly. I saw a bird house."
I saw a toad stool.” After some instruction and revision, Joe wrote:

*My beautiful blue eyes behold,*
*Blue bird in the sky,*
*Orange butterfly on a flower,*
*Red and black ants fighting.*

Looping gave me the time I needed to think about Joe, Amy, Tedrick, and the others, and devise a plan for addressing their individual needs.

**Moving Forward**
The second year, revision became more than recopying for many of my students. In first grade, the students spent their time writing one draft that they seldom wanted to change. I spent hours modeling and demonstrating how to add more details to make their stories clearer. But it was not until the second year, when they pulled out their old drafts and journals, that they could begin to see how they could make their stories more exciting. They had had a whole summer away from their writing, and then, reading it as for the first time, they were able to ask themselves the same questions that I had asked the previous year. They were finally able to see their stories from a reader’s point of view and begin to understand what readers needed from their writing.

Publishing became important to my class during the second year. We published a class book which featured stories and poems from our two years together called “First Servings, Second Helpings.” Looping gave the children the opportunity to take the first serving of stories from the first year and add to them or give them a second helping.

The children had access to their writings and journals from first grade. They enjoyed looking back at their previous work. Many times they would laugh at their own first-grade stories, commenting on how little they had written. Many students would ask to rewrite their work. Joe found a story about a trip to Stone Mountain that he wanted to work on.

His story from first grade read: *I went to stone mountain.*
Below his one-sentence story was a picture of him traveling in his family car. His second-grade story about Stone Mountain was much more detailed:

I went to Stone Mountain. It took 4 hours to get there. When it got dark I watched the laser show. Then it was time to go home.

He included a picture of himself sitting outside watching the laser light show.

They had had a whole summer away from their writing, and then, reading it as for the first time, they were able to ask themselves the same questions that I had asked the previous year. They were finally able to see their stories from a reader’s point of view and begin to understand what readers needed from their writing.

Amy found a story about her birthday party in her first-grade folder:

Today is my 6 brbay my mom is gin to pik my up urle I hop my sibr has a gud brbay prte. I lik my sibr. I love my sebr. My sibr is and my famul is to. They are cunning fom the pas wara yus to liv.

[Today is my sixth birthday. My mom is going to pick me up early. I hope my sister has a good time at my birthday party. I like my sister. I love my sister. My sister is and]

My family is too. They are coming from the place where we used to live.

Amy’s early second-grade writing shows her inability to hear and write her sounds. However, her story is much more focused and detailed. But because it was written at the beginning of second grade rather than later into the year, her reversals and phonetic problems are very much apparent:

My Favorite Party
By Amy

My favorite birthday was my 6 birthday. Becas we got to play in the pool and sandbox. In the sandbox we bet for chess. In the pool we paled in the pool with the war toys. We heb godfish. My cak was chat lake a fish.

After we got thru eating, we wran out in the bak rod. We state doing the little centers. One was. We had to get shving crm on a pap pas. We had to go to the water. Wat we had to do was get a swt gun and swt the shv crm of. And a noter one was we got to go on the swing set on the swing set you koud swing or silid ora the mokbas. And a nutr lite center is in the sandbox you hav to dig for sheshites the last centers is in the pool In the pool tus wat toys. You can biv word the pool. Tan we ran to the hors and up the por and jrk limlad thn we weit bak to the swgingsite and sandbox and pool and swt gons

Tan my friends wit home and I rested.

[My favorite birthday was my 6 birthday. Because we got to play in the pool and sandbox. In the sandbox we bet for chances in the pool. We played in the pool with the water toys. We had goldfish. My cake was shaped like a fish. After we got through eating, we ran out in the back yard. We started doing the little center. One was we had to get shaving cream on a paper plate. We had to go to the water. What we had to do was get a squirt gun and squirt the shaving cream off. And another one was we got to go on the swing set. On the swing set you could swing or slide or the monkey bars. And another little center is in the sandbox. You have to dig for seashells. The last center is the pool. In the pool there was water toys. You can dive under the pool. Then we ran to the house and up the porch and drank lemonade. Then we went back to the swing set and sandbox and pool and squirt guns. Then my friends went home and I rested.]

Later in the second-grade year, Amy spent much more time with her revisions and editing. By Christmas, she had taken over her writing and would not finish a piece until she had it close to perfect. She found a story from first grade about Christmas. She rewrote the story from a different and more personal point of view.

First grade:

A Christmas Eve Dream
By Amy

Once upon a time a famley got a Christmas tree and it was little thay put the litte christmas tree in a pat of water in the loving room and thay put a lot of chirtmas ornaments and a sart at the tap of the litt chirtmas tree it grw and grw

[Once upon a time a family got a Christmas tree and it was little. They put the little]
Christmas tree in a pot of water in the living room and they put a lot of Christmas ornaments and star at the top of the little Christmas tree. It grew and grew.

Second grade:

*My Best Christmas Ever*
By Amy

“Wake up Katie, said my mom. “Uh, uh,” I said until my mom said, “It is Christmas morning.” I got out of bed and went down the stairs as fast as I could and looked under the Christmas tree. I asked my mom if I could open the presents.

She said that little girls aren’t allowed to open presents and me and my sister said, “We can too. You’re just trying to trick us.” And she laughed while she said, “Well you could.” I was so happy. I saw a lot of games and I said, “Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes!” I loved the games so much that I started to kiss them.

Then I looked under the Christmas tree again and I saw more toys and more toys and more toys. But I just stared at them and I wanted to open all of my games but my mom said, “You can open one present today.”

Then I saw a TV and a VCR too and the tape Swan Princess. And when I found out that the TV was going to be in my room, I was so happy. I thought we could watch TV at night without my mom and dad knowing. And I could sit in bed while I watch TV. Then I played my game Guess Who and I won. And that was my best Christmas ever.

The second-grade story had far fewer spelling or grammatical errors than the August story about her birthday. She had made great strides to overcome her phonetic problems.

Although I have since moved to another town, I remain close to many of those students and their parents. Some have come to visit, and others call or write letters and cards. I cherish these lasting relationships.

**Family Ties**
At the end of the second year, I had the students write about being in the same class for two years. Most of the students wrote about the classroom as a family. They wrote about caring for each other:

*The Best Thing About Being in This Class*

The best thing about being in this class is good because we have really good time together. We share things and take turns. We say funny jokes. Our teacher says that we are a family. I agree with her. I think we need to take up time with others. We are still a family. We take care of each other. That’s why I’m glad I am in the same class. We might even let our friends down, but we still are a family. And that’s why I’m in this class.

—Charles

*The Best Class*

The best thing about being in this class for two years is having the best friends, Amy, Jackie, and Sharon and Krissy. And having the best teacher in the earth. It is really good because the class seems like a family to me.

—Jenny

We were a family of writers who wrote and rewrote our stories. Over two years we formed strong bonds that made us a writing community. Everyone understood that the process was as important as the product, and students came to better understand the process. They came to understand that writing was important to me, and therefore it became important to them.

For two years I was allowed to watch them grow and blossom as writers. I had watched them write, rewrite and revisit their writing for two years. They were able to look back at the previous year and make decisions as real writers.

But for me, looping with these students gave me much more than just a chance to look at their writing for two years. I was given a family. Although I have since moved to another town, I remain close to many of those students and their parents. Some have come to visit, and others call or write letters and cards. I cherish these lasting relationships.

I would recommend looping to any teacher. For me, the first year was good, and the second year was wonderful. The benefits were more than academic; as my students said, “We are a family.”

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