Waiting It Out

Months of Writing in a First Grade Classroom

DEBRA E. WELLER

Enabling young children to grow as writers by allowing them to write regularly can be a frustrating experience. For those who would return to fill-in-the-blank workbooks, Debra E. Weller has some advice: Be patient.

It's the first day of first grade and nineteen timid faces stare up at me in anticipation. We sit knee to knee, forming a circle on our classroom carpet as I explain that we will begin each school day with "talking circle." Each student will say her name and tell us something important. I don't expect much this first day, and most children, in trepidation, barely whisper their names.

Delia K. Mayer is another story. When it's her turn to talk, she breathes in deeply, inhaling our attention as if it is the sweet fragrance of a rose. "I have a song to sing to the class," she proclaims and, taking another deep pull of air into her lungs, she straightens her shoulders and begins to sing. A strong, clean melody pierces the quiet of the classroom. She grabs words for her song from the surroundings and I realize she is composing impromptu. At first I'm impressed. Then, when I realize Delia would love to monopolize the class attention for at least the next ten minutes, I clap my hands sharply together in applause. The other children join me. Delia beams.

The next day during talking circle, Delia sings us another song. Then she adopts a Jamaican accent while speaking to us. Later that morning, she volunteers to read and the Jamaican accent is still present. I've never met a child like her. Her lack of inhibition is astounding. Her verbal dexterity is impressive. She reads at a second grade level. I am sure she will be a prolific writer.

But I am wrong. As we begin to write, she produces stories that begin and end in rambling dialogue with no apparent purpose. The characters in her story are conveniently picked from whoever is sitting next to her in the classroom. She loves the sound of words; what those words mean is of secondary importance to her. I realize I'm reading melody and rhythm that Delia has put on paper.

For the entire month of September, Delia's contribution to our daily "talking circle" is a song. Her writing continues to be meaningless—when and if she chooses to write at all. How am I going to get Delia to write a coherent narrative or several sentences about the same topic? Then one day in early October, I have a brainstorm.

When Delia makes her typical announcement, "I have a song to sing," I declare an ultimatum. "Delia, you may not sing to us unless you have written your songs out on paper first." My plan backfires. She never sings again during talking circle, and during writing time, she visits with the other children and wanders around the classroom making long circuitous trips between the pencil sharpener and her desk. She does not even draw.

It is students like Delia that make me question the validity of daily writing time in the first grade classroom. After all, time is a teacher's most precious commodity. Could I be directing Delia's time in a more productive manner? Still, I refuse to abandon our daily writing. I am convinced that this daily experience with composi-
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tion, this practice with putting words on a page, is more meaningful than fill-in-the-blank exercises or contrived editing drills. So I encourage beginning writers to engage in the production of text, understanding that not all of their writing will end up as neat story packages ready for distribution.

The next day while I talk with a student at Delia’s table, I notice that Delia is drawing pictures of naked people, seemingly trying to steal attention from the other students at work. As I take notice, Delia stows her contraband picture in her writing folder and begins to write.

I know that my presence stimulates Delia to write, but my goal is to foster independence. When will Delia be motivated to write without my direct supervision? I have no idea. I wait to see what happens.

On October 4, Delia tells me she is writing a story about her brother’s birthday.

“Would you read it to me?” I ask.

_My Ice Cream_ My only 7 brother. He loves me. I kissed my brother. He kissed me today. He kissed me. I love my brother.

I ask Delia to tell me more about the birthday. As Delia talks, she easily recalls the details of her day and repeats the dialogue and the events of the party in sequential order. I repeat the key points of her elaboration and suggest that she add to her story. But when I read Delia’s story again later, I see that she has ignored my suggestions.

Then on October 22, she writes a story about her father and staples it together with the birthday story as if they are page one and page two of the same story. Am I surprised? No. Exasperated? Yes. Delia’s decision suggests that she has ignored multiple minilessons about finding the focus in her writing.

Delia writes:

_Daddy_

I love my daddy. He loves me too. I love my Mommy. She loves me too.

“Why did you staple this story about your daddy with your brother’s birthday story?” I ask.

“My daddy was there, too.” She explains. Her explanation encourages me. Perhaps she is beginning to think beyond the once-and-done approach many beginning writers employ. Perhaps this is a version of revision. I am detecting movement, but, as my next encounter with Delia’s writing reveals, not much movement.

The next day she writes:

_Me and My Daddy_

One day me and my daddy was going to the store and I was talking all the way. I said, Daddy where are we going? We are going to —— I was good. Yack yak yak yak yak dad yak forget it!

“I’m done,” she announces, uttering those words—spoken part in triumph, part relief—that have caused many a teacher’s heart to sink. I suggest that she reread her story to be sure. She changes the title from “Me and My Daddy” to “My daddy and Me.”

We talk again. I try heartfelt praise—that usually works. I laugh with her about the ending, comment on her skilled word choice, then prompt her to tell me more. Again she relates a detailed narrative. Again I suggest that the details of our conversation would interest readers. Again Delia seems to ignore my revision prompts. So much for heartfelt praise.

On October 26, Delia begins making a picture book.

“Why did you choose to write a picture book?” I ask.

“Because there’s not as many words,” she states.

Because Delia seems to love words, this surprises me. But at some point, almost all my students take some unexpected turns. The one constant that dictates my contact with all students is patience. It’s hard to allow time and space for the seeds of independence to grow. It would be so much easier to tell beginning writers what and how to write. Over time, I have found that the willingness to wait is the beginning writing teacher’s most valuable commodity.

But the fact that I am committed to patience does not mean that I am not also impatient. The tension between process and product is acute. I know what these first grade writers should be able to do at the end of the year. At times, it seems that the gap between my expectations and the developmental level of the kids is as wide as the Grand Canyon. Daily practice as readers and writers narrows the gap for the students. I am tense, but I trust, I reflect, and I wait. Recalling my past experiences as a writing teacher gives me the courage to continue. I remind myself that it’s a long, often laborious process to create a climate conducive to composition in the first grade classroom, a yearlong endeavor to encourage kids to engage in the construction of story.

By January, first-graders are able to write short anecdotes containing five or more sentences. Encouraged by this progress, I have often set my sights too high. Many of these anecdotes don’t lend themselves to the
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God hates evil
And god loves
His people so much.

God is our Dad
And in God's
Way we are all
Sisters and
Brothers and
We are God's
Kids.

Delia is unsure how to spell the word people, but she knows where to find the correct spelling—in her poetry book. “My People!” she exclaims. She begins to recite the poem by Langston Hughes, and Cynthia joins in. Their faces beam.

The night is beautiful
So the faces of my people
The stars are beautiful
So the eyes of my people
Beautiful also is the sun
Beautiful also are the souls of my people

After this recitation, Delia pulls her poetry anthology out from under her desk to copy the spelling of people on her draft.

As I reflect about Delia’s growth as a writer, the lesson I’ve learned seems to be about time. The growth that happens in a first grade classroom happens after months of writing first-and-only drafts. The substantial revision efforts that take place in a first grade classroom are not the ones that occur within a week or a day. Revision doesn’t happen when I demonstrate technique or when I insist that kids rewrite. Revision begins when young writers internalize the idea that writing can be revisited after months of abandonment, that another

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Heaping Snow
by Delia K. Mayer

I was out side in snow. It was
cold out side. It was
glamorous sparkles outside
my door. Did you have some
snow too? Yes or No

Delia is quite content with her poetic description of the snow. I prompt her to tell me more.

Then, in the name of revision, I command that she write. She continues. Her finished story reads:

Heaping Snow by Delia K. Mayer

I was out side in snow. It was
cold out side. It was glamorous sparkles outside
my door. I loved it so much. I was with
my Uncle Ron and my sister. I hit my
uncle’s head with a snowball and I hit
my sister in her head too. Then they
fell on the ground. They hurt their
heads. They had an aspirin and a
glass of water because they had a
headache and after that they went to
bed.

I insisted that Delia create a plot to justify her description of the snow. And what did I get? A contrived plot with a simple premise. When we see moments of brilliance in our student’s writing, it’s tempting to push for

Erica revises a story called The Invisible Angel, Carmen writes a chapter book, and
Richard writes a story called Bridging up to Wolves. No one crowds around my desk. No
one seeks my approval. No one wonders
what to write about. Everyone works quietly
writing and reading their own writing or
that of friends, even Delia.

Delia sits in the editing corner with Cynthia.
They edit a draft of Delia’s poem called
“People.” Delia has begun to label most of
her writing as poetry. Poetry seems to allow
her the freedom of expression she craves
and frees her from the organizational rules
of narrative, which she still finds cumbersome.

People are nice.
People are cute.

[Image of child writing]
Imitation as Freedom

generative rhetoric have steadily declined and have been almost nonexistent since 1995. Yet in composition classrooms all over the country, as we adopt various process techniques, we still hold our students accountable for the fundamental elements of good writing: organization, coherence, unity, and clarity, among others. Lisa Delpit has pointed out that our expectations are sometimes “hidden,” that they remain invisible to students as we encourage them to explore their ideas and work within the process model of teaching. Delpit’s argument, though intended to address the situation of minority students, also applies to students in composition classes around the country. Indeed, it seems the height of hypocrisy to use strictly process techniques when we expect high quality “products” from our students’ writing.

Therefore, it seems highly logical to argue for a return to some aspects of so-called product pedagogies. In particular, the use of imitative exercises seems to be an ancient practice that should be restored. Imitation allows students to see models of successful writing from either professional or student authors and gives them a chance to work with the text, transforming it in meaningful ways. Even though the word “imitation” implies something stale—a copy instead of an original—it is a kind of heuristic that allows students to be creative, to find their own voices as they imitate certain aspects of other voices. Finally, imitation and the modeling of structure have similarities to the process of discovery so often touted as the most significant aspect of process approaches. It seems clear that both rely on an inductive approach because they ask students to derive general ideas from particular instances. The models from Writing About Literature that I used profitably in high school still have value today, and I suggest that as a field, we should look to see the general value of using models and imitation in composition. Nothing less important than the future of our field depends on it.

References


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look at an old topic can help us find the fresh voice we seek to express ourselves and impress others.

Given the time to write every day, the time to consider and then reconsider ideas and how language works, children like Delia begin to understand that revision is a possibility. If I hold the door open to that possibility, they will step through and experiment.

Each classroom comes to school with an individual version of literacy, a variety of experiences, and a complex social network, all of which influence everyday classroom performance and the propensity to learn. But in spite of these differences, I am convinced that all kids benefit from the opportunity to stretch their imaginations, to apply the skills of literacy to their personal narratives, to engage in composing the stories of their lives.

Teachers today are presented with “new and improved” scripted teaching guides, additional curriculum mandates emphasizing isolated skill development, and an increased focus on standardized tests. Yet, my experience has shown me that none of these programs and demands will replace the key elements that make writers out of first-graders: lots of writing and lots of time.

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