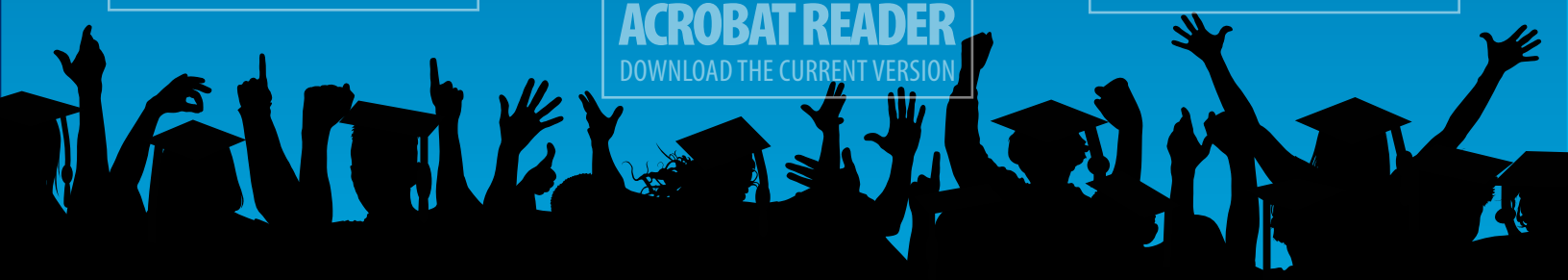
Welcome to Writer's Workshop

Teaching Young Writers the Way Professionals Teach Themselves

by
Steve Peha



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Welcome to Writer's Workshop!

The idea behind Writer's Workshop is simple: if we know from experience that a workshop approach to the teaching of writing works well for aspiring professional writers, why shouldn't we use this approach in our classrooms? As in a professional writer's workshop, each student in the class is a working author. The teacher is a writing professional and peer coach, guiding authors as they explore their craft. Instead of spending the majority of class time on spelling tests, grammar worksheets, handwriting practice, and other isolated sub-skills of writing, Writer's Workshop is designed to emphasize the act of writing itself—students spend most of their time putting pencil to paper, not just learning about it. Over time, students learn to choose their own topics and to manage their own development as they work through a wide variety of writing projects in a sustained and self-directed way.

In Writer's Workshop classrooms, full class lessons are short and tightly focused on practical real-world issues. As in professional writing workshops, emphasis is placed on sharing work with the class, on peer conferencing and editing, and on the collection of a wide variety of work in a writing folder, and eventually in a portfolio. Teachers write with their students and share their own work as well. The workshop setting encourages students to think of themselves as writers, and to take their writing seriously.

Writer's Workshop is a popular way of organizing a writing class for one simple reason: it works better than any other management system yet devised. And it works because it is based on the idea that students learn to write best when they write frequently, for extended periods of time, on topics of their own choosing.

So What *Exactly* is Writer's Workshop?

For some, Writer's Workshop is a philosophy, but I like to look at it simply as a way of managing the class. Each Writer's Workshop period follows the same basic format:

What is Writer's Workshop?

- **Mini-Lesson (5-15 minutes[1]).** A short lesson focused on a single topic that students need help with. You don't need to give a mini-lesson each day; 2-3 times a week is usually just fine.
- **Status of the Class (2-5 minutes).** A quick way of finding out what each student is working on.
- **Writing Time (20-45 minutes or more!).** They write. You can write and/or conference with individual students or small groups.
- **Sharing (5-15 minutes).** Writers read what they have written and seek feedback from their audience. You can share your writing, too.

[1] These timings are rough recommendations only. I have a bad habit, for example, of letting my mini-lessons run too long, but it doesn't really hurt my teaching that much. The important things to note are the relative differences in the timings for each section and the order in which they are performed. Try to devote at least half your class period to writing. Writer's Workshop can be done in as little as 40 minutes but it usually feels rushed to me. I recommend setting aside at least 50 minutes, preferably an hour.

The basic structure never changes, but there is still a lot of flexibility. For example, all sections except the writing time are optional. You need not give a mini-lesson every day; twice a week is usually fine. Status of the Class can be done as little as once a week or even less. You need not conclude each class with sharing, but I recommend doing it as often as possible because the students usually love it, and because it is so instructive. The only part of the class that is required is the writing time, and it is perfectly appropriate to conduct classes on a regular basis where the students do nothing but write.

What's a Mini-Lesson[2]?

The most common way of delivering explicit writing instruction is via mini-lesson. A mini-lesson is a short, teacher-led discussion of a single writing concept. There are three guiding principles to the mini-lesson approach:

What Makes a Good Mini-Lesson?

- **Brevity:** Mini-lessons are short, usually 10-15 minutes, rarely more than 20. They are intentionally kept short so that the majority of each writing period will be available to the students for writing.
- **Focus:** Each mini-lesson covers a single, narrowly defined topic. If the teacher is introducing serial commas, for example, other uses of commas will probably be introduced in a separate lesson.
- **Authenticity:** The best mini-lessons are based on real things that real writers really need to know. They are practical and immediately useful. They are targeted to address, in a timely way, the specific challenges writers face as they explore new writing tasks and genres. For example, if many students in a class are working on fiction writing, a mini-lesson on the essentials of character development would be appropriate, as would a lesson on how to punctuate dialog.

The secret to giving effective mini-lessons is asking yourself this question: "What single problem am I trying to help these writers solve?" The best way to do this is simply to take note of the specific problems your students are having, and to ask them from time to time what they would like help with. You don't have to turn your whole class over to the students, but from time to time, maybe every few weeks or so, ask your students to give some thought to the difficulties they've been having, and what kind of help they want next. Then base your lessons on that information. A good rule of thumb for deciding on when to give a particular lesson is this: if more than a third of your class really needs to know about something in order to make progress, it's time for a mini-lesson.

But How Do You Know They're Learning?

In a traditional writing classroom, students might spend a week or two working on some aspect of punctuation, usage, or grammar, doing worksheets and other in-class exercises, followed typically by a test. The degree to which a student has mastered the par-

[2] Regie Routman (author of *Invitations, Transitions, Literacy at the Crossroads,* and many other fine books) has suggested calling them "Focus Lessons" because they serve to focus the class on a single important issue. While I would agree that this is a better term, the term mini-lesson has been in circulation so long that I'm more comfortable using it.

ticular activity is then evaluated by how well that student performs on the particular problems they encounter on the exam. And that's that. Writer's Workshop is different.

In Writer's Workshop, teachers don't test their students on every new concept presented. They don't have to. If the mini-lessons are delivered in a thoughtful and entertaining way that addresses legitimate student needs, and students are given encouragement and ample writing time to try out the new things they've learned, the concepts will begin to show up in their writing, which is exactly where we should be looking for them.

This approach has several advantages over the traditional format of lectures followed by worksheets followed by tests and further re-tests:

Advantages of the Mini-Lesson Approach

- **Students incorporate their learning in an authentic way.** They get the chance to use newly acquired knowledge in their own writing, instead of just filling out dittos.
- **Students aren't intimidated by new concepts because they know they're not on the hook for performance on an upcoming test.** This is particularly beneficial to slower students who get more time to become comfortable with new things.
- **Class time isn't wasted giving tests.** There's more time for writing and other mini-lessons. Students literally get more instruction, and more time to put that instruction to use. Teachers don't have to correct tests either.
- **Students spend less time on worksheets, fill-ins, repetitive drill work, and other sub-skills of writing.** They spend more time applying what they've learned in an authentic way. They spend time writing and sharing— two things they enjoy—instead of doing things they find boring and meaningless.
- **Students develop greater confidence and independence.** Because there are no tests or worksheets to fill out, students must take responsibility for their own learning. One happy consequence of this is that many students learn to become their own editors by applying knowledge offered in mini-lessons to their own work, rather than waiting for the teacher to correct it after the fact.
- **Teachers spend less time correcting papers.** [3] And because of that, they can spend more time working with students individually and in small groups, and teaching high quality lessons.
- **Most teachers like it better (once they get used to it).** Planning is simplified because lessons are short and you always base them on what students need at the time. There's very little guess work; lessons are so well targeted that they have a much greater chance of success.
- **Most students like it better (right away).** They get more time to write and to share their writing. They aren't hounded to perform on tests and other assignments that don't have much to do with writing.

I'll be the first to admit that this approach takes some patience. Sometimes it's hard to know whether students are "getting it" or not. As soon as I've presented a mini-lesson there's a real temptation to test them right away to "see what they know." But the best information we have about teaching and learning says that this just isn't the right thing to

[3] Actually, the most effective writing teachers I have come across spend little or no time correcting student writing unless they are helping with something specific, at the student's request, during a mini-conference. In all my reading about the teaching of writing, I have yet to come across any significant evidence that teachers can help students by sitting down with a red pen and correcting their mistakes. And I have found no research indicating that correcting student writing helps students improve better than less time consuming methods like Six Traits self-assessment or sharing (but there *is* evidence that correcting keeps students from improving in many situations). I have, on the other hand, found lots of support for the idea of teaching students to correct their own writing. This is one of those wonderful cases where research gives support for a practice that saves teachers time and is also more effective at helping kids learn.

do. New information takes time to sink in, and many teachers now realize that in order to learn something well, students have to use it for a while on their own without the fear of being negatively criticized. That's why we teach "mini" lessons, so students have the majority of their class time available for applying what they've learned to their own work.

If I want hard evidence about what my writers know, I just ask them. Here's a sample of an activity I use a lot (I would have to admit that, technically, this is a "fill-in" sort of thing, but it is a good pre-writing activity for helping students get started with portfolio reflections).

Take a look at this example:.

When I Grow Up

. . . I tried to run, but I couldn't. The monster seemed like it was growing by the minute! And then, the most horrible thing was about to happen . . . I screamed and sat boltright up in bed. I'd just had the most horrible nightmare ever. I gasped swallowing huge amounts of air. I'd never been so scared in my life! Still gasping, I called "Mom!" My mom came sleepily into my bedroom and sat on the edge of my bed. "What is it sweetie?" she asked, her voice full of concern. Tears swelled up in my eyes as I remembered the ghostly monster from my dream. "I . . . I had a nightmare." I finally managed to say. "Poor thing," my Mom said sympathetically as she gave me a hug. "But don't worry," she said, "you will stop having them when you grow up." I nodded my head in aggreement. Although inside I secretly felt that I wouldn't. After my Mom left, I lay on my pillows and started to think. People -- mostly grownups, were always telling me that things would happen, or I would like something better when I was "grown up." Apparently they thought being grownup ment liking everything and knowing everything. Well I most certainly did not! Personally I thought growing up ment having responsibility, and trying to make good choices, etc. I wondered if my life would be different as a grownup. I mean I knew I would be older, and more mature, but would I be prettier? fatter? skinnier? would I choose to get married? or get a job? Then I realized something. I was nine years of age. Right now none of that stuff mattered. I didn't need a husbend because I had older siblings! I didn't need a job because my Mom and dad provided for me. The only job I had right now was to be a kid. And that was just what I was going to do.

A nice piece. In general, it's a very entertaining and inventive response to a time-honored writing prompt. For a 3rd grader, the writer shows a lot of maturity, both in subject matter and style.

I can be fairly certain that this little girl can write, but how can I tell what she has learned about writing? I can intuit from her work that she has learned quite a bit, and this might lead me to believe that she could repeat this level of performance, or even exceed it, at another time. But how can I be sure? And how do I know she's learned anything about the Six Traits from all those mini-lessons I've given her? Maybe she's just a naturally gifted writer, or maybe she just got lucky with the prompt, or worse yet, maybe she cheated by getting help from an adult or simply retelling a story she heard somewhere else.

To answer these questions, I asked her to do the following reflection in class:

Instructions: **[1]** For each of the six traits, pick one thing from your paper that you like best, and tell why you like it. **[2]** Pick specific parts of the piece to talk about. **[3]** Use the vocabulary from the Six Traits criteria for each trait to help explain your reasoning. **[4]** Give lots of details to support your opinion.

Here's what she wrote:

Trait	Author's Comment
Ideas	I like all my Ideas, because there are things not everyone would think of. Example: starting my story with a dream.
Organization	I think my story ties together well because it is not out of order. Example: the end of my story ties together pretty well.
Voice	The story sounds like me in 2 ways, 1. I'm always having nightmares. 2. I'd love to stay a kid forever - And don't like it when people tell me things will happen when I grow up.
Word Choice	I went through the "chose your words" book and found lots of juicy word. Example: ghostly and boltright.
Sentence Fluency	I think my story will sound grreeaatt! when it's read aloud, because I added sentences like "her voice full of concern" and "tears swelled up in my eyes."
Conventions	I tried to do my best in punctuation. But I forgot totally to indent!

What a wealth of information I have here. For example, I can see that she probably does know about paragraphing, but that she just forgot to show her paragraphs by indenting (something I could not have deduced from her writing alone). She knows how to use a reference source (the "Choose Your Words" book) for improving her Word Choice. When it comes to Voice, I can tell not only that she knows what it is, but that she equates authentic sounding writing, not with her choice of language (as in things that would *literally* sound like her), but with things that always happen to her, or long-held opinions; in short, she's beginning to understand that Voice has to do with her personality and not just how she talks—an important sign of postive development with this trait. Her knowledge of Sentence Fluency may be a bit conflated with her interest in details from the trait of Ideas, but she's on the right track, and Sentence Fluency is a difficult trait for young writers to understand (this may be an indication of something I need to teach again). As for Organization, she knows that things need to go in order, and she has a sense that the ending needs to tie things up in some fashion, but she's a bit vague.

This kind of analysis tells me more about this little girl than just looking at her writing alone. By reviewing her reflection, which took her only a few minutes to write, and me only seconds to read, I can be more certain about where she is. I know what she knows, and I know that I know I know it, and that gives me confidence that at least some of my teaching has been effective.

As challenging, and non-traditional, as the mini-lesson approach can be, over the many years that this model has been developed (it's over 20 years old and backed by volumes of research), teachers, researchers, and students have found it to be the most effective way of working. Many teachers worry, as do many parents, that if we don't test students regularly we won't have enough information to evaluate progress, an attitude that has forced many teachers into cramming their classes full of "gradeable" projects so they can cram their gradebooks full of grades. The overhead of running classes this way can

be unbearable, especially as class sizes increase. Teachers should spend their time teaching, not grading. That's what they get paid for. Amid all the anxiety that parents, teachers, and students have about grades, it's important to remember that we can always find out how students are doing at any time simply by using the techniques of the Six Traits Direct Writing Assessment—by rating a student's work on the five point scale for each of the Six Traits. And because this is "direct" assessment—a measure of actual student writing as opposed to an arbitrarily selected set of exam questions—we get the best information we can about what students know and how we should be helping them.

What is Status of the Class?

In Writer's Workshop, students work on different pieces of writing at different rates. Many students may even be working on several different pieces at the same time. With everything that's going on, how do teachers keep track of individual student progress? They take Status of the Class on a regular basis. Status of the Class is exactly what it's name implies: a way for teachers to know the status of each student's progress at a give point in time. Status of the Class can be done in many different ways. The simplest form is to ask each student what piece they're working on and/or where they are in the Writing Process. As soon as the mini-lesson is over, just whip around the room as fast as you can and have each student tell you what they're going to be working on for that day. That's really all there is to it. Many teachers write down the information they get so they can reflect on student progress over time, and make intelligent decisions about pacing. But many teachers also just use it as a way of focusing student effort prior to writing time, and giving themselves a general overview of where each student is.

Status of the Class can be done every day, but if you don't want to take the time for it, once a week will probably be enough to make it work for you. If going around the room student by student doesn't work for any reason, there are plenty of other ways to take Status of the Class. One of the most interesting methods I've seen was shown to me by Julie Weinbrecht, a 4th grade teacher I was working with at Black Diamond Elementary School in Black Diamond, WA. She sets up a pocket chart and labels each row with one of the stages of the Writing Process. Then she takes her student's pictures and moves them from row to row as they progress on their pieces. This allows her at any time, and from any place in the room, to glance at the chart and immediately know where all of her students are in their pieces. It also allowed me to know where her students were when I came in to teach—sounds like a great idea if you're expecting a sub.

Knowing where your students are is important, but there is another good reason to do Status of the Class. As students begin to share their work, everyone in the class will start to become interested in what other writers are working on and how it is coming along. Status of the Class allows everyone to know what everyone else is doing, and that builds a sense of expectation and a feeling of community—two essential elements that should permeate every Writer's Workshop classroom.

What Should I Be Doing During Writing Time?

With most of the period devoted to simply letting the students write, a lot of teachers wonder what they should be doing while the students are working. During writing time there are two activities you can pursue:

[1] Write with the students.[4] As soon as the students start to write, I usually start to write, too. I try to write in front of them on the overhead or on the board. I don't do this every time, but I would recommend doing it at least once a week, if not more often. Writing with your students is a wonderful thing. I could go on and on about the benefits. They just get so excited when they feel you're working right along side of them, struggling with the same issues, opening yourself up to the same potential criticisms. I usually write for about 5-10 minutes, after which time I begin to conference with individual writers.

[2] Mini-Conference with Individual Writers. I move through the classroom helping students who have raised their hands for assistance, or I just politely inquire of certain students about how they are doing, what they are working on, what they're planning to do next, etc. I'm not spying on them to make sure their doing their work. I'm checking in with them in a respectful way to see if they need any help. A mini-conference should last about 2-3 minutes, no more than 5. During a typical week of Writer's Workshop, you should be able to get around to work individually with every student in the class at least once and sometimes twice. You will find this type of frequent close interaction with individual students to be extremely valuable. At least twice a week you get to help just about every student in the class with something specific. You can't be much more effective than that.

In workshops, teachers often ask me: "How do you talk to students in a conference?" Just like I would talk to anyone I was trying to help. I almost always ask these questions:

Important Mini-Conference Questions

- **What are you working on?** I always try to be as unobtrusive as possible, but at the same time, I want the students to know that I expect them to be working on something.
- **Can you read me some of what you've got?** Even if you know exactly what they've written, ask them to read it back to you. This is more for their benefit than for yours. One of the best habits we can help young writers develop is the habit of reading over their own work.
- **How is it coming along?** or **Is there anything I can help you with?** Try to find out if they are having a specific problem that you can help them with right then and there.
- **What are you going to do next?** This is the best question of all because it focuses the student's attention on where they are headed, something that many beginning writers don't give much thought to.

The rest of the discussion, if there is any, just seems to fall out naturally from there.[5] I find that by sticking to this basic set of questions, I am also helping to establish a good

[4] Recently, Lucy Calkins, one of the originators of Writer's Workshop, came to Seattle for a workshop. One of the teachers in her workshop asked her, "Do you always write with your kids?" She replied: "Oh gosh, no. Sometimes I just sit at my desk and scribble on a piece of paper." I don't think Ms. Calkins was advocating deception. I think she was trying to say that you don't have to write every day with your students. Just let them know that you do write once in while. For some of your students you may be the only adult writer they ever encounter.

[5] "Children began using the writing conferences to think and to consider possibilities for their writing. I stopped groping for the right questions to ask and just listened. When I did ask questions, I asked genuine questions—ones that came naturally to my mind because I felt confused or wanted more information. Instead of supplying answers, I turned issues back to the children asking: What do you plan to do about that? How will you solve that problem? Given the

model for peer conferencing later on. Ideally, you can even have the students walking around the classroom helping each other out with mini-conferences, but that takes a lot of preparation and strong modelling, don't worry about pulling that off right away.

I find that teachers have a lot of anxiety about mini-conferencing that comes from an expectation that somehow it is much more complicated than it really is. The best way to learn about mini-conferencing is, of course, to practice it regularly. But if you're a bit nervous about it, just remember this: your main priority is to listen, not to talk. Just hear your students out and respond respectfully, just as you would to anyone who was asking for your help or your opinion on something.[6]

How Do I Manage Sharing?

When I started doing Writer's Workshop, I left out sharing. I thought it was just a waste of time because I didn't see any instructional value in it. But after trying it a few times, I've become convinced that sharing is the most instructionally valuable part of the class, other than the writing time itself (often far more valuable than the mini-lesson). Here's what I started to notice: Students are influenced much more by their peers than they are by us. When a student reads something to the class and gets a particular reaction, they really take it to heart. Take the age-old battle over details, for example. We're always asking students to put in more details. The 1st grade teacher asks the 1st graders, the 2nd grade asks the 2nd graders, and so on right up through graduation. Now, instead of hounding students week after week, I ask them to share and then I ask the other students in the class if they have any questions about the writing they've just heard. Sure enough, whenever an author leaves out important details, the questions from the audience start flying fast and furious: "What kind of dog do you have?"; "When did you get him?"; "Do you have to feed him and take care of him?"; "Were you sad when he ran away?"; "How did you get him back?" And the list goes on and on. After a few questions like this, I suggest to the author that he or she include some additional information that might tell the readers (his or her classmates) what they want to know. Sometimes, I don't even mention the word details. I have had far more success influencing students this way than I ever did with mini-lessons, conferencing, or threats of lowered grades.

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opportunity to talk with a more patient and authentic listener, the children came forth with wonderful ideas that amazed me with their rationale, thoughtfulness, and creativity."—*Carol Avery, ...And with a Light Touch, p. 143*

[6] I learned a ton about mini-conferencing by reading Donald Graves' *A Fresh Look at Writing.* Somehow, Graves managed to capture, word-for-word, a variety of mini-conferences he had had with young writers. Whether they are authentic or not (they seem a bit idealized to me), they are great blueprints for your own work.

Sharing time can get a little loose, especially at certain grade levels and with certain groups of more willful students. Here are some general recommendations to help you organize your sharing time and keep it running smoothly:

Tips for Better Sharing

- **Teach students how to make constructive comments to their peers by modeling that kind of commenting yourself.** This lets everyone know what to expect during sharing.
- **Ask students to use the vocabulary of the Six Traits criteria when making comments.** This eliminates many problems because language like: "That was dumb." or "I didn't like it." is not part of the vocabulary of Six Traits.
- **Make sure that everyone knows that all comments are only suggestions.** Authors do not have to make the changes their readers request (even if the teacher is doing the requesting). This makes authors more willing to listen and keeps readers from getting too insistent.
- **Make sharing voluntary.** No one should ever be forced to share their writing with the class. This reduces anxiety about sharing.
- **Conduct periodic small group share sessions.** This lets more students share and practice making constructive comments.
- **Ask students to consider creating informal "revision plans" based on the feedback they get from sharing.** This helps students connect reader response with the act of revision.
- **Share your own writing often and be a good listener.** This shows students how to take and how to use good constructive criticism.

The two biggest problems teachers face with sharing are: **[1]** So many students want to do it that you don't have time get everyone in. The best way to handle this is just to keep a running list of who wants to share and have students sign up when they want to. **[2]** Students write so much in Writer's Workshop, especially toward the end of the year, that each student needs 5-10 minutes or more to share their work. The best way to handle this is to limit authors to reading just a small section. Tell them to read the section they think they need the most help with.

Donald Graves suggests a basic approach to sharing that, while I don't use it all the time, I think is very valuable. Graves suggests that students focus their audience's attention on one specific aspect of their work by saying something like: "The name of my piece is…. I'd like you to listen for… and tell me what you think about it." This can help bring some predictability and structure to your sharing sessions if you feel they're getting a bit loose.

Planning For Writer's Workshop

Teachers who use Writer's Workshop for a while come to appreciate it for two main reasons: **[1]** Their students improve dramatically; and **[2]** It is very easy to plan. Students improve so much because they get so much time to write, and because the workshop atmosphere is more conducive to personal expression and growth than the traditional writ-

ing classroom. Writer's Workshop is easy to plan because the lessons are such a small part of the activity of the class, and because, when lessons are used, they arise naturally out of student needs.

The best way to show you how to plan Writer's Workshop is to show you how a typical teacher does it. Here's an actual week of class activity written up by a teacher I worked with during the 1996-97 school year. Her name is Esther Goffe and she teaches 3rd grade at Sunrise Elementary School in Enumclaw, WA. Prior to January of that year, she had not used Writer's Workshop, Six Traits, or Writing Process. But after just a few hours of in-service training, she felt comfortable enough to give things a try.

All year she had been concerned about her students' development with writing conventions—an ongoing concern among her parents and throughout the district as well. She had been teaching conventions using Daily Oral Language[7] and not seeing much improvement. She and her students were also getting a bit bored doing exercises out of the book. I encouraged her to try an approach that would involve focusing on one particular convention at a time (as opposed to the multiple issues in a DOL lesson), and offering her instruction in the context of actual writing that her students were doing (instead of using the examples out of the DOL book). I suggested that every once in a while, say once or twice a month, she focus for a week on a particular convention that the class felt they were having trouble with (as opposed to whatever the DOL book said should come next). During one week they worked on periods. During another week they worked on commas. And, using a Writer's Workshop-style approach, things started to click.

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[7] Incidentally, DOL is not very effective at improving student understanding of conventions. Contrary to its title, it should not be used daily at all. Over 60 years of research has proven conclusively that conventions are best taught one type of error at a time (DOL exercises typically feature multiple errors) and within the context of actual student writing (DOL exercises come from a book, not from the students' own writing). No credible educational researcher that I am aware of has shown that DOL improves student understanding of conventions better than other well-known techniques. And none of the best writing teachers in the world (Graves, Atwell, Calkins, Murray, Giacobbe, et al) recommends it. Even the publishers who make DOL have admitted to me, when I have asked them directly, that DOL is a poor use of classroom time and is generally ineffective at improving student use of writing conventions. If you want to improve your students' conventional performance, follow research-proven methods such as those recommended by Constance Weaver in her excellent book *Grammar in Context*. DOL is appropriate for teaching proofreading skills only and, as such, should be used occasionally, perhaps once every couple of weeks at most, and strictly for that purpose. It is also handy for raising scores on standardized tests (though there is no evidence that it improves actual writing ability), so it may be effective in that limited and artificial context if used daily for one or two weeks just prior to test time.

As a follow up to the issue of how and when to use Daily Oral Language, I spoke with Mrs. Goffe at the end of the school year and she told me that, out of curiosity, she gave her students a final DOL test during the last week of school. To her surprise, this group of 3rd graders scored significantly better than any group she had ever had. Ironically, this dramatic increase in performance seems to have occurred despite the fact that she stopped teaching DOL in January and never went back to it the rest of the year.

As a favor to me, I asked her if she wouldn't mind telling me about her planning process and the results she was getting in her class. At the end of a week of class, she e-mailed the following:

A Week of Writer's Workshop

- **Monday:** Having received your package with Dane's letter,[8] I decided we would be writing a letter. A wonderful opportunity for everyone. I reviewed with the students the fact that we have had a period week and a comma week. I asked what they felt they needed to learn about this week. There were several suggestions such as: period (again), colon, semi-colon, quotation marks, and paragraphing. With that many suggestions I had the students vote. Quotation marks and paragraphing were tied so we voted a second time to break the tie and paragraphing won. I then presented Dane's letter on the overhead and we read it together and discussed the possibility of writing back to him. On the overhead, I wrote a letter to Dane with the kids' help regarding the content of the letter. We discussed the fact that a paragraph talks about only one thing. We also discussed the indent of the first line. The students then went to work writing their letters.
- **Tuesday:** I gave each student a copy of Dane's letter, just so they would have their own copy. We discussed content again and that each paragraph was to talk about one thing. Students wrote and brought their letters to conference with me. When they read their letters, I did remind them of periods if they stopped reading in a place where there was no period, and they would insert one if needed. Five students finished their good copy.
- **Wednesday:** I made transparencies of the five finished letters. The students read the paragraphs silently and told me the one thing the paragraph was talking about. We counted paragraphs. Students decided it was pretty easy to count paragraphs because of the indent. Students then wrote. Fourteen letters were finished. The paragraphing was good, but again when students read their letters and periods were missing, I did have them insert them in the spot.
- **Thursday:** Reviewed transparency letters, counted paragraphs, discussed the one idea talked about, and wrote to finish the letters. Students who were done wrote on another piece or worked on revising. At reading time, I had them count paragraphs in their novel. We then chose a few paragraphs at random and talked about the one thing the paragraph was talking about.

Each student in Mrs. Goffe's class finished a letter in four days. Many students finished sooner and went on to other writing projects. I reviewed the letters and found that each student had used multiple paragraphs successfully. In short, the "lessons" worked. Even students who hadn't paragraphed effectively all year turned in letters with multiple paragraphs correctly indented and dealing with a single idea as Mrs. Goffe had instructed. They also wrote very nice letters that my student enjoyed immensely when he received them. When I asked Mrs. Goffe about her planning time, she responded that, for all intents and purposes, very little was required.

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[8] This was a student writing sample I had sent her. Mrs. Goffe knew in advance what piece she was going to use to introduce her lessons for the week, but she didn't know exactly what lessons she was going to introduce. She just started with an authentic piece of writing and went ahead from there. It sounds a little loose, but it works because it forces the students to direct their own learning. And it's so much easier for teachers because they don't spend a lot of time planning lessons that are of little interest or value to the class.

Regardless of how simple this was to plan and execute, Mrs. Goffe did many important things to insure that the week would go smoothly, and that her students would make good progress:

Writer's Workshop Done ~~Write~~ Right!

- She asked her students what they wanted to work on and then based her lessons for the week on their responses.
- She used an authentic sample of student writing as a model.
- She focused on a single conventional issue in the context of a single form of writing, but also weaved in other important concepts on an "as needed" basis.
- She taught conventions in the context of actual student writing, and focused her lessons on one convention at a time.
- She conferenced every day with individual writers.
- She modeled writing for her students.
- She kept the lessons short and gave her students the majority of the period to write.
- Instead of giving her students a rule for paragraphs like "A paragraph is five sentences." or "A paragraph must have a topic sentence.", she gave them a tool they could use ("A paragraph talks about only one thing.") to see how their paragraphs were functioning to make their letters easier to read and understand.
- She had her students share their writing.
- She helped students with other issues like content and periods informally as problems arose.
- She rarely corrected the students' writing but had them correct their own whenever possible.
- She allowed students to work at their own pace, but still brought the "assignment" to closure at an appropriate time. Students who finished early simply went on to write other pieces.
- She had Writer's Workshop four days in a row at the same time each day.
- For reinforcement, she connected what her students were doing in writing with simple activities in her reading program.

Mrs. Goffe would be the first person to tell you that she's pretty new to all this (she only started about four months earlier) and that she is only now beginning to feel comfortable with it. But she's giving it a try and getting excellent results. It takes time and patience to make progress with this style of teaching, especially if it is very foreign to you. But more than anything else it simply takes a willingness to try it out for a period of time, and a bit of dedication to follow the research-proven guidelines that underlie this important method of contemporary writing instruction.

How Does Six Traits Work with Writer's Workshop?

Six Traits is a perfect compliment to Writer's Workshop for several reasons. First of all, the traits provide a perfect framework for mini-lessons. Six Traits lessons are particularly helpful for guiding students in revision. In addition, after being introduced to the appropriate "student-friendly" criteria, students have a "built-in" vocabulary that allows them to participate fully in the frequent discussions that Writer's Workshop mini-lessons thrive on. Six Traits also provides students with a powerful analytic vocabulary they can use to help each other during sharing and peer conferencing sessions. The emphasis in the Six Traits approach on reflection and student self-assessment is also quite appropriate in Writer's Workshop.

Six Traits also helps teachers deal with one of the most challenging aspects of running a Writer's Workshop classroom—giving the workshop focus and direction over time. Because students have so much freedom, it can be hard to hold a class together, especially if neither the students or the teacher have ever worked this way before. Students can easily become unfocused and unproductive. This is one reason why some teachers do not use Writer's Workshop, or why they only implement it in a partial or modified way. Put simply, Writer's Workshop can be hard to teach at first if you and the students aren't used to it. But Six Traits can make it easier. Using Six Traits as a "backdrop" for writing instruction and assessment gives students and teachers a comfortable structure in which to work. It's rigid enough to provide a complete framework for all lesson material, yet flexible enough to be used by almost any teacher in almost any setting. Six Traits helps teachers create and deliver useful lessons, it also helps students communicate effectively about their writing, as well as helping them to manage their own development as writers.

A Short Note For Teachers of Grades K-2

Can you do Writer's Workshop with students who can barely write? The answer, I'm happy to say, is an emphatic "Yes!" Writer's Workshop has been done successfully for many years with students as young as 1st grade, and now even Kindergarten teachers are using it. Here are some suggestions for implementing Writer's Workshop with small children:

Tips for Doing Writer's Workshop with Primary Students

- **Don't underestimate the amount of time primary students will spend writing if given the chance to do it regularly.** I have been in kindergarten classes where students can work on their own for 30 minutes or more, and in 1st and 2nd grade classes where students have written for 60-90 minutes without stopping.
- **In kindergarten and 1st grade tell students that they can always draw if they want to.** Drawing and writing are roughly equivalent forms of communication at that age. Students in 2nd grade still love to draw, but text should ideally be the focus of their work in Writer's Workshop by then.
- **Concentrate your mini-lessons on very simple issues that your young writers are struggling with.** Students at this age find almost every aspect of writing to be extremely difficult. Usually the simplest mini-lessons are the best.[9] For example, how to hold the pencil is a good lesson for a lot of students.
- **Teach writing concepts through your reading program.** Introducing students to the trait of Conventions, for example, can often be done more effectively through reading than it can through writing. Teaching the other five traits through picture books also works well.[10]
- **Try your best to teach writing every day at the same time of day.** This kind of predictable and dependable structure is extremely important for young children just starting out.
- **Teach conventions in accordance with best known research.** It's easy for young writers to get off to a bad start if they cannot deal effectively with writing conventions. Student self-consciousness about correct spelling is particularly troublesome because many students will only write words that they can spell. If you teach spelling lists instead of spelling strategies, if you don't use a word wall, if you don't encourage students to use invented spelling and teach them how to do it, if you don't show them how to correct misspelled words *later* as part of an editing step, if you don't help them draw useful connections between reading and writing, they will have little chance of reaching their potential when they move on to the intermediate grades.

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[9] "Once, after I had observed Shelley Harwayne teaching a writing workshop, I commented to her that her mini-lesson had been fabulous. Apparently this comment perplexed her because as far as she knew, she hadn't given a mini-lesson that day. At the time, Shelley said nothing to me about her confusion. At home that night she reread her notes. 'What could Lucy have meant?'." Then she realized that instead of what she perceived as a mini-lesson, she had begun the workshop with a quick tip. She had said to the children, "Can I ask just one thing of you before you begin your writing? When you open your folders today, and every day, would you reread what you have written? Before you add to it, have a little conference with yourself. Ask yourself how you feel about the piece, whether there are ways you could make it better." Then she said, "All right, take out your folders and, first, read them to yourselves." To my way of thinking, this was a perfect mini-lesson."—*Lucy Calkins, The Art of Teaching Writing, p. 198.*

[10] NWREL has put out a picture book bibliography that lists books organized according to which trait they best illustrate. This is a very useful resource that I have relied upon extensively in my teaching. I have worked with a couple of schools who purchased the entire set of books and put them in the library organized by trait. Any time teachers need a lesson all they have to do is pop into the library, grab a book, and go.

If you're looking for a good reference book for doing Writer's Workshop in the primary grades, I highly recommend Carol Avery's *...And with a Light Touch,* published by Heinemann. This book is thorough and well organized. It also includes a chapter on Reader's Workshop. Doing Reader's Workshop along with Writer's Workshop is the perfect way to pull your Language Arts program together. And there are few people more qualified to help you out than Carol Avery.

A Short Note For Teachers of Grades 3-6

It is in grades 3-6 that students seem to get down to the business of serious writing. Typically, in 3rd grade, students begin paragraphing and, in general, writing in a way that is much more expansive. Some 3rd graders may produce pieces as long as 2000-3000 words on a regular basis, while 10-15 page stories are not uncommon among 5th and 6th graders. It is during these years that students begin to get their first taste of the craft of writing. Here are some suggestions for structuring your Writer's Workshop in grades 3-6:

Tips for Doing Writer's Workshop in Grades 3-6

- **Encourage students to experiment with many different genres of writing, but emphasize personal narrative and other non-fiction forms over fiction.** Fiction is the hardest genre to work in (and the least useful to adult writers working in the world). Few adults ever master it, let alone 8-, 9-, and 10-year olds. Students are likely to experience more success with personal narrative than any other form, and you'll be more likely to see the results of your teaching in their work.[11]
- **Teach more mini-lessons aimed at the Revising stage of the Writing Process.** Getting students in the habit of revising their writing should be one of your biggest goals. Revision is the hardest part of writing, so that's where writers need the most help.
- **Discourage students from using the computer except when preparing pieces for publication.** Allow computer use only during Editing and Publishing. Most students at this age are such poor typists that their productivity drops to as low as 1-3 words per minute when composing at the computer.[12]
- **Introduce your students to the idea of a writing portfolio.** These students can write a lot during a year, and it's great for them to see some of it collected up and bound together.
- **Encourage students to submit their work for publication in magazines that publish student writing.**[13] You can also make them aware of the dozens of Internet sites that display student writing as well.
- **Teach writing at least four days a week.**[14] Students need this level of consistency to make good progress.

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[11] In general, when I have assessed large amounts of student writing, I note that children score higher *on many traits* when they write from their lives as opposed to writing fiction. Why? Because it's always easier to write about the things you know. The best ways to encourage kids to write more about their lives and less about spacemen, magic horses, and pirate ships, is to write about your life, and to read high quality personal narrative writing to them.

[12] With regard to productivity, Donald Graves notes in *A Fresh Look at Writing* that by 5th grade, children can write as much as 20 words per minute writing by hand. Think about that for a minute. That's 400 words in 20 minutes. I have checked kids' productivity in my own classes against Graves' research and found him to be fairly accurate. 3rd graders seem to be able to write about 10-12 words a minute when they really get going. Graves also notes, however, that this high level of productivity can only be reached if children are writing at least four days a week.

[13] *The Market Guide for Young Writers,* published by Writer's Digest Books lists over 150 places where kids can publish their work. My two favorite magazines are *Stone Soup* and *Merlyn's Pen.*

[14] "Professional writers experience near panic at the thought of missing one day of writing. They know that if they miss a day, it will take enormous effort to get their minds back on the trail of productive thought. In short, it is extremely in-

My favorite book for working with students at this age is Donald Graves' *A Fresh Look at Writing,* published by Heinemann. This is a substantially revised and updated version of his classic *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work*. Even if you've read that book, I recommend reading this one because it is so good. It is filled with many good mini-lesson ideas, some interesting anecdotes, and several transcribed mini-conferences. More than any other book I have read, this one has taught me more about how to talk to students about their writing. Two other excellent books are Lucy Calkins' *The Art of Teaching Writing* and Ralph Fletcher's *What a Writer Needs.* Fletcher's book is particularly wonderful because it is relatively short, exceedingly practical, and full of some of the most wonderful anecdotes you'll ever come across.

A Short Note for Middle School and High School Language Arts Teachers (Grades 7-12)

Many middle school and high school teachers don't think they can use Writer's Workshop because their class periods aren't long enough, and because they can't teach writing every day. But one of the most famous books ever written about Writer's Workshop, Nancie Atwell's *In the Middle,* documented the successful use of both Writer's and Reader's Workshop with 7th and 8th graders. So while it's true that conditions may not be ideal,[15] Writer's Workshop is still probably the best way for secondary teachers to organize their writing programs. Here are some tips on how to make Writer's Workshop work:

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efficient to miss a day. In addition, as our data on children show, when writers write every day, they begin to compose even when they are not composing. They enter into a constant state of composition. [*Continued on next page…*]

If students are not engaged in writing at least four days out of five, and for a period of thirty-five to forty minutes, beginning in first grade, they will have little opportunity to learn to think through the medium of writing. Three days a week are not sufficient. There are too many gaps between the starting and stopping of writing for this schedule to be effective. Only students of exceptional ability, who can fill the gaps with their own initiative and thinking, can survive such poor learning conditions. Students from another language or culture, or those who feel they have little to say, are particularly affected by this limited amount of time for writing." —Donald Graves*, A Fresh Look at Writing, p. 104.*

[15] In recognition of the excellent research that has been done over the years regarding the time students need to learn and the time teachers need to teach, many school districts are beginning to move toward so-called "block period" schedules with classes as long as 90 minutes. So, it's likely that in years to come, middle school and high school teachers will have the time they need to implement methods like Reader's and Writer's Workshop more thoroughly.

Tips for Doing Writer's Workshop with Middle School and High School Students

- **Since time is short, your best bet is to cut back on the mini-lessons.** Keep them as brief as possible, and use them only when necessary. They are not nearly as valuable to the students as writing and sharing.[16]
- **Even if you can't teach writing every day, you can teach it on the same days each week.** Try for two or three days in a row each week, or every day for a few weeks at a time. At this stage in your students' intellectual development, writing is a much more valuable skill than reading—especially the reading of fiction which will have very little practical value for students as they get older.
- **If you have to choose between having time for reading and time for writing, favor writing.** Writing is the more valuable skill for students trying to get into college or to enter the workforce. Besides, writing requires all the skills of reading plus the logical thinking of math. At this age, all of your students should be able to decode text. So favor writing over reading whenever you have to make the choice. It will serve your students better in the long run.
- **Encourage students to deal with personal issues in their writing.** During their teen years, students have some heavy things to deal with. Tell them it's OK to write about serious subjects, and create an environment in your classroom that is supportive of this.
- **When you do assign writing topics, try to pick things that students can relate to in an authentic way and write honestly about, or that they will find practical in the years to come.** Book reports and other "critical" writing may have been the bread and butter we were raised on, but few of today's students have much use for it (and neither did we if we want to be honest about it). Think about the kinds of writing young adults need to do in the real world (college entrance essays, job and scholarship applications, business letters, journalism, technical writing, general problem solving, etc.), and model your writing assignments on those things.

Your best reference for working with students in their teens is, of course, Nancie Atwell's *In the Middle,* but as students get older, the whole world of adult writing books is open to you and your students. Some of the best books are:

- William Zinsser's *On Writing Well.*
- Ken Macrorie's *Telling Writing.*
- Natalie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones.*
- Peter Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers.*

[16] "In theory, mini-lessons are wonderful. The ritual of beginning every writing workshop with a whole-group gathering can bring form and unity to the workshop, and it's wonderful, when writers are deeply absorbed in their writing, to see the effect of a few carefully chosen tips from experts. Yet in practice I have found that mini-lessons often represent the worst part of a writing workshop. When I bring visitors in to observe writing workshops, I often deliberately time our visits so we avoid the mini-lesson."—*Lucy Calkins, The Art of Teaching Writing, p. 198*

The **Talking About Teaching** Series

Talking About...

Writing in 2nd Grade

by
Julie Bumgardner
2nd Grade Teacher
Santa Fe Trail Elementary
Independence, MO

with
Steve Peha
President
Teaching That Makes Sense
Seattle, WA

A **Teaching That Makes Sense** Publication

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Welcome to Writer's Workshop

Steve Peha: *In April of 2000, I got an e-mail from Julie Bumgardner, a 2nd grade teacher at Santa Fe Trail Elementary School in Independence, MO. Julie and I met at a summer institute in her district where I presented workshops on reading and writing. Normally, Julie asks me about teaching, but this time she asked me a question about herself: What advice might I have for her about developing her own writing?*

For someone who is regularly faced with answering this question, you'd think I'd have a pretty good response lined up, but I don't. The only advice I had for Julie was "Write!". Then, of course, the question of what to write about came up and I suggested she write about her teaching. I had two reasons for suggesting this, one genuinely helpful, the other utterly selfish. First of all, I know we all write best about our own lives and the things that are important to us, and there was no doubt in my mind that Julie's teaching consumed a huge part of her life and that it was tremendously important to her. Second, I wanted a writing partner, a teacher I respected and enjoyed interacting with who could help me get some of my own thoughts and feelings on paper.

This is how we got started.

Writing Teacher's Block

Julie Bumgardner: I've been wondering what I could possibly contribute to a book about teaching kids to write when I've only been a teacher for four years and only doing Reader's and Writer's Workshop for one! Although I am only forcing myself to admit it just now, I have been avoiding getting on the computer to

respond to your invitation because I couldn't think of anything "good" to say. (This is probably what my kids feel like sometimes when we write.) I suddenly didn't know what to say about anything, and felt like I didn't really have much to tell about teaching my kids to write. Then I realized that I was looking at it in the wrong way. I couldn't talk about teaching my kids to write because that's not what I do! My kids are already writers — filled with great ideas and stories; I just help them to "get it out". I help them to develop and make sense of what's already there. Then I show them ways to make it better.

Steve: I really love this paragraph, Juile, because it expresses what I believe to be three of the most important factors in determining a writing teacher's success:

> **(1)** Teachers who write and reflect on their own writing process are more successful than teachers who don't.
>
> **(2)** Successful teachers don't teach kids to write, they teach their kids to teach themselves by providing models, scaffolding, and strategies that help their students develop ownership and independence.
>
> **(3)** Successful teachers act out of the belief that their students are writers the minute they walk into the classroom.

You also touched on one other thing, something that is very important to me but that doesn't show up often in research or in other professional writing. You write here that in your view of teaching writing you "just help them to get it out", the "it" being the wonderful stories and ideas they already have inside them.

When I think about this notion, I think about what it means to be a great editor. Not some textbook grammarian, one of those nitpickery types who red-pens every other word just to prove how smart he is, but a real professional editor whose job it is to help a real professional writer produce real professional writing.

I have often heard and read great writers commenting on the value of having a great editor. And the way they describe the role of the editor is pretty much always the same: someone who helps them figure out what they really want to say and then makes sure they say it as well as they can.

This is what I think about when I'm helping kids learn to write —being a great editor. Like you, I model my own writing, I offer solid strategies, and I often encourage students to pursue a certain direction that to me seems promising, but I have a hard time associating this with the traditional view of teaching as the delivery of planned curriculum. Most of the time I have only a rough idea of what I'm going to teach, and at the end of a class, as I look back on what transpired, so much of what we covered seems to have arisen spontaneously, and only for a brief moment even then. Rather than focusing on what I want to teach, I try to discover what the kids need to learn. And for me, this begins by assuming the role of an editor, so they can assume the role of a writer.

Workshop to the Rescue

Julie: I absolutely love workshop-style teaching. I have taught at grades K, 1, and 2, and struggled for three years now to find a way to really teach reading and writing. Every year I have felt like a major flop. I felt disappointed in myself and searched for a way to do it better because no matter how hard I worked, it just wasn't right somehow. I've used basal series', tried small groups, journaling, theme teaching, team teaching, word wall sets, book clubs, group stories, centers, etc. I had some successes and some failures, but was always left with the very strong feeling that this was just wrong. I knew I wanted to use a workshop-style, but the books I read about it were somehow unfulfilling.

Steve: You're certainly not the first teacher to articulate these same frustrations about learning to teach reading and writing. I've heard many others express the feeling that no matter what they do, there's often this "sick in the gut" feeling at the end of the day (and especially at the end of the year) that somehow they

didn't do right by their kids. The question I often ask myself is "How can so many teachers not know how to teach reading and writing when the needed information is so thoroughly researched and widely available?" Clearly, teacher training is not adequate, nor is there enough "on the job" support for new teachers. Then, too, there appears to be something in the culture of teaching itself that resists solutions to these common problems.

Many teachers I have worked with have also expressed the same ambivalence about workshop-style teaching that you noted. They seem to have a feeling that it offers something significant, and that is what draws them in initially, but often they are too uncomfortable with it to explore it in depth. The books present another challenge. Frankly, there are more books about workshop-style teaching available today than there are about any other named approach, and many of these books are truly outstanding. However, no book can capture the experiential nature of Reader's and Writer's Workshop; it's an extremely dynamic form of teaching that must be practiced over long periods of time in order to be learned. For many teachers, having good books available almost makes it worse because those who study hard sometimes develop the feeling that they are doing it wrong if early results don't measure up to expectations.

Teachers interested in workshop-style teaching also face certain specific challenges from their schools, their states, and their profession: **(1)** Very few administrators actively endorse this kind of teaching. **(2)** The instructional culture of high stakes state testing encourages lock-step programmed instuction. And **(3)** Many teachers who practice it actively and advocate for its use are shunned by their non-workshop-style peers.

Workshop-style teaching isn't easy to learn and even when teachers learn it they face constant resistance from their communities. The truth is that more and more teachers are moving to workshop every day because it is well-researched and thoroughly proven: workshop-style teachers get better results than traditional teachers. Ironically, however, it is precisely their success that gets them into trouble.

First Day of Writer's Workshop

Julie: A scared, unsure, but excited and determined me started school this year. How was I going to do this? How would it work? How would the kids respond? What was the natural progression that would make this work best? Was I going to be able to manage the class in this style?

We started writing the first day. I told them they were already writers. I told them that all the ideas they needed were already in their heads in the stories they tell me, their friends, their parents, and whoever will listen. I told them that these stories are just like the published ones they read in books, but they just weren't written down yet.

I emphasized that writing is about you and from you, that no one else has the same ideas in their head. Even if two people choose the same topic their stories will be different because each person has different thoughts and feelings. Each of us is unique, I said, and so are stories. I told them we would be writing about things that happened in their own lives because in order to write well you have to know a lot about what you're writing about, and the thing you know most about is yourself.

Steve: I'm so glad you decided to start with Writer's Workshop on the first day of school. Many teachers seem to think that it is more appropriate to wait until later in the year but I have never felt this way. Getting a Writer's Workshop up and running requires the establishment of good management procedures and there's no better time to do this than the first day of school. I have also found that writing is a terrific "getting to know you" activity. One of the most important things teachers have to do during the first few days of school is get to know their students. They also need to make sure their students get to know each other. Having kids write about their lives and share their writing with the class is an easy way to accomplish this.

Topic T-Chart

Julie: In order to gather and focus their unique ideas, we started out the year with a Topic T-chart. Some kids referred to them a lot during the lesson, and even commented that there were so many ideas, they couldn't decide which one to write about-they wanted to write about them all! Some filled their lists up completely and had to take a few moments to make a heartfelt decision.

Even When it Didn't Work, it Still Worked

Julie: I'm not sure why the strategy didn't work for some kids. I think it was because some of them listed very generic things, things they really didn't have strong feelings about. But even in those few cases where the T-chart strategy didn't help the kids, the strategy still helped me help them in conference because it gave me something tangible to work with. If I said something like, "What about baseball? You wrote that on your 'Like' list." They might say something like, "Yeah, I do, but I like soccer better." Having zeroed in on something they really cared about, I asked more detailed questions. This usually led us to a memory they wanted to write about or another idea they wanted to use. I think some of them just needed to talk about it a little, writing down a list wasn't enough.

Steve: It turns out that talking is actually a Pre-writing strategy. I never thought about this until one day I was working with a very noisy class. We did a Topic T-Chart just like you did here but every time I tried to teach something, they would start talking. After several minutes of starting and stopping, I finally gave in and told them they could talk for a few minutes. The catch was that they had to talk about their topics. (As it turned out, they were already talking about their topics, I was just too upset to listen very closely.)

While the kids talked, I circled the room. I thought I was going to have to police the discussions and keep them on topic but all I ended up doing was listening.

The discussions were great. Some were telling their stories, others were listening and asking good questions. Five minutes later I stopped them and said "Start writing." At first they didn't know what to do so I told them to write down their stories exactly as they told them to their friends. That was all it took. The talking died down and pretty soon all I could hear was the sound of pencils on paper.

Building Excitement Through Personal Connection

Julie: I especially like the Topic T-chart strategy because it allows students to get excited about what he or is going to write about as they explore, even in this very casual way, their own personal connection to the topic. Rather than me having them write about something, it becomes me letting them write about something. No matter what I do, I can't generate that much excitement about a pre-chosen topic for each and every student. Sometimes, sure, there's something most of the class is interested in, and asking them to write about that is something they want to do. But usually this is an experience we've all had together, like a field trip, so they are still actually writing about their own experience.

Encouraging Independence

Julie: At the end of our first session, I had the kids keep their Topic T-charts in their writing folders. In subsequent sessions, some kids got them out on their own to look for a new topic. It was so great to see them doing it without my asking. They were taking ownership of their writing process and this somehow made them even more excited about their topics.

When I saw them taking the initiative and doing it on their own, that's when my excitement really started to grow. This was exactly what I'd been wanting for my kids. The best part was that I didn't do it for them; I didn't even really teach them to do it. They already had these great ideas in themselves; I just gave them a tool they could use, any time they had trouble, to solve a problem every writer faces each time he or she stares down at a blank page.

Steve: The skill you describe here (the ability to pick a good topic independently and begin writing about it) is the first thing every writer needs to know. In the real world outside of school, there is no writing until a writer picks a topic. It doesn't matter if you're a novelist or an office worker or a parent or a small business person, you don't start writing unless you have at least some idea of what you're going to write about.

I have also found that teaching kids how to pick good topics solves many other writing problems. For example, kids who pick their own topics encounter Writer's Block less frequently. I have also found that conventions improve as well, probably because kids who pick their own topics have a greater sense of ownership in their work. Finally, the great American writing researcher, Donald Graves, has pointed out that when students write every day on topics of their own choosing they enter into a "state of constant composition" where they find themselves thinking of things to write about outside of class — at home, on the playground, on the way to school, etc.

My Safety Net

Steve Peha: *Every teacher needs a safety net, a strategy or activity we can fall back on when we're feeling unsure of ourselves. For Julie, it was the Draw-Label-Caption strategy, a simple Pre-writing exercise that everyone can feel successful with. But Julie did more with DLC than most teachers do with it. She developed it over time into a powerful tool for her kids. She also used it to ground herself in the management of her Writer's Workshop.*

Draw-Label-Caption

Julie Bumgardner: My safety net was the Draw-Label-Caption strategy because it was easy for the kids; students at any level could do it in some form or another. Knowing that I had something rich and authentic to do that everyone could be successful with made me feel more comfortable and helped the kids build confidence. It also gave me a way of teaching them about Writer's Workshop and the Writing Process right at the beginning of the year before any of us felt very confident. Using Draw-Label-Caption, every student could be an active participant in all parts of the workshop: we could learn to share and to give constructive feedback, we could talk about different stages of the Writing Process, I could teach them about our workshop procedures, and as we were doing this, they could build their confidence about writing, and I could build my confidence about running a Writer's Workshop.

Steve: I got the idea for Draw-Label-Caption from a workshop I attended where a teacher shared some ideas about teaching caption writing as an authentic writing form. I had never thought of teaching kids to write captions but this teacher had so many interesting perspectives on it and the results she got were amazing. I added the labeling because it seemed like a perfect transitional task for younger kids who were experimenting with single words but hadn't quite found their way to writing sentences.

As you point out, one of the advantages of this strategy is that every kid can do it well. I've even used it with pre-schoolers. But the most interesting thing for me is seeing how well it works with older kids and even adult writers. As you mention below, the act of choosing a focus for one's writing is very important. And this strategy seems to be ideal for helping writers of all ages and abilities solve this problem.

Finding the Focus

Julie: To introduce the strategy, I started by talking about why a writer would want to use it. I talked about how figuring out what your ideas are, and finding a focus for your writing, is just as important and, in fact, as necessary as the writing itself. I told the kids that the picture that they draw for Draw-Label-Caption is like stopping to take a photograph of that moment. One scene of that memory, of all that happened during the time you're thinking of, captured as if taking a picture of it. We stuck with that analogy because it seemed to make sense to the kids.

I told the kids that when you take a picture with a camera, you have to have a main thing that you're taking a picture of and it has to be in focus. If you're swinging your camera around or walking along trying to take a picture while you're still moving, what's going to happen? You will have a blurry picture. Nobody will be able to tell what it is a picture of. If you stand too far away from what you want to take a picture of, you won't really know what the picture's all about because there will be too much stuff in it. And if you get too close, there's not enough background so it's hard to understand how the thing you're taking the picture of goes with the other things around it.

Steve: Photographic analogies are very common in the teaching of writing, but you did something here that I hadn't thought of. I'm always telling kids to focus their writing but I never do it as thoroughly and as thoughtfully as you did in this case. In one lesson, you touched on three common problems all writers experience:

(1) In your analogy about the "blurry" writing that results from "swinging the camera around" you're addressing the problem of kids jumping quickly from one topic to another.

(2) When you talk about "standing too far away" and having too many things in the "shot", you're helping kids understand effective depth of detail.

(3) And in your last comment you're tackling one of the toughest things I've ever tried to explain to kids: the notion that readers need some context for a story (or "background" as you put it) in order to understand it.

In the past, I had always thought of Draw-Label-Caption as a simple Pre-writing strategy, just a warm-up really. But you've taken it further and turned it into a great strategy for detail.

Julie: Helping them to understand the camera analogy was one thing, helping them to create a picture that would serve as an effective representation of their experience was another. I had to use many different techniques. For example, someone drew about the time they held their new kitten for the first time, but then just drew a large picture of a cat. I felt that there was more going on, so I asked the student, "If I was there watching this experience happen and I had a camera, what would I have snapped a picture of? A big cat? Or would you have been there too?"

In another case, we did a shared writing about scoring a goal in a soccer game. I acted out an example of what it would look like. I went through the steps of kicking the ball, stopping at regular intervals to ask if this picture would be different than the previous one, to show them how many scenes there might be in just one experience. Then I did a quick sketch on the board of me standing next to the ball smiling and asked if this would be a good drawing to show what had happened. They laughed and said, "No! You have to draw you kicking it, and put the goal net in there."

Steve: You mention here that one challenge is helping kids understand that a single "event" is often comprised of individual "scenes". I'm often surprised that so many "TV generation" kids don't realize this but perhaps they just don't have a term in their vocabulary to describe it. If you think about it, a "story" is just a set of "scenes" and each scene is really just another Draw-Label-Caption. So, by putting several DLCs together, one for each scene in their story, even very young writers can develop fairly complex narratives, and even take them all the way through the Writing Process.

Draw

Julie: After picking a topic, everyone does a sketch. It took a mini-lesson to explain that this is not the same as an illustration or a picture. We don't use color and we don't spend a long time drawing each piece. We use stick figures to represent people and animals. In the sketch we draw everything that is a part of the experience including the background and other objects that might have been around: an end table, their cousin, the garden they were standing in front of—it all goes in, it's all a part of the experience, where you are, when you were there, what was around, etc.

Steve: Doing the mini-lesson on the difference between illustration and sketching is really valuable because it ends up saving so much time. I have also found that starting with a rough pencil sketch helps me make an analogy between "pre-drawing" and "pre-writing". I tell the kids to use only pencils and not to do any shading or texture or fine detail. Of course they want to use all their colored markers and pens so I tell them they will get to do that later, during the Publishing stage, when I will help them take their rough sketches and turn them into finished illustrations.

Label

Julie: The next step is interesting because even though the kids really get into it for some it takes a little prodding; they don't seem to know that it's ok to write all over their sketch! The idea is to label absolutely everything in the picture from the grass, to their new shoes, to the cat, etc. They use lines to connect their label with the things they are labeling, they write all over their sketch, left to right, up and down, sideways, whatever works for them. I had some kids who ran with this. I had a few really low kids who could hardly write a word. One boy ended up labeling 3 things using sound spelling (''me'', ''dad'', and ''wtr'' for water) and he worked as hard on those three things as the kid next to him did on his 20 things. And that's one of the great things about this strategy. Anybody can do it successfully. And when they're done, they have a focused idea.

Steve: At one point in my work, labeling saved my life. I was stuck where every primary teacher gets stuck: trying to help kids move from drawing pictures to writing words. I was having kids draw and then tell me what their pictures were about. Then, as soon as they said something like ''I am playing with my Dad.'' I would ask them to write that down. And they would just stare back blankly wondering why what they'd just done wasn't good enough for me. It would take me months to get kids from the ''picture only'' stage to ''picture and text'' stage. Then I tried labeling. As soon as I modeled it, the kids loved it. I let them share each time they put in one or two more labels. Then, after they'd labeled most of the things in the scene, I showed them how they could write a sentence using the labels they had already written and a few ''Word Wall'' words (like ''the'', ''is'', ''and'', etc.) to string it all together.

For me, this was a good example of how one simple change in my teaching could cause a dramatic change in student achievement. Five years ago, it would have taken me most of the school year to help a group of kindergartners write their first sentences—and a few wouldn't have done it until 1st grade. Now I can do it by the end of September with most kids, even traditionally low performing students and second language learners can get to this point in just a few months.

There's also an important secondary benefit to this kind of rapid growth in writing: kids learn how to read. Writing requires all the skills of reading so it's not surprising that shortly after kids become comfortable writing their first sentences, they begin to start reading sentences, too. For me, the implications of this are profound. If we know that we can teach all students to write in sentences by the end of kindergarten, then we know they can also become independent readers in the same time frame—a full year ahead of most developmental benchmarks.

Caption

Julie: The last part is to write a caption for their sketch, one sentence that tells what is happening. Once again, we had to have a mini-lesson about this. "Does 'I like cats' tell what's happening in a picture in which you are being handed the kitten that is your new pet?' No, they said. How about "My mom is handing me my new kitten"?

This, once again, came easily to some but proved a more difficult concept for others. One girl drew an elaborate sketch of the outside of a hospital with a car driving in the parking lot of the emergency room and with the headlights on showing that it was night. She told me about the experience of crying in the backseat with a broken arm as her sister held her and her mom turned in and pulled up to the emergency room doors. She seemed to have a solid grasp on the scene and her focus. But when she wrote the caption it read, "I fell off the monkey bars." It took a while for me to help her understand that that caption belonged to a different scene. I, of course, gave her the option of doing a new sketch to go along with that caption if that was what she wanted as her focus, but she wanted to work with the scene she had drawn. She eventually worked out a great caption that really told what was going on in her sketch.

Steve: The anecdote about the girl with broken arm is a great example of an effective conference. For me, having the kids' picture to work with dramatically improved both the efficiency and the effectiveness of my conferencing. I used to

spend the first few minutes of every conference trying to figure what the kid was doing. Often they didn't know themselves, so we were both a little lost. Now, with the picture in front of us, we've got something tangible to work with. Regardless of which strategies the kids have used, I insist now that they have some pre-writing materials for me when we conference.

I also liked how you gave the writer the option of drawing a new picture for the caption or of revising the caption to fit the picture she had already drawn, and then letting the writer decide. Either approach would have been profitable for this writer but the best part is that she gets to make the decision herself. Even though I see this happen all the time now in classrooms where I work regularly, I'm still amazed that such small children can make legitimate editorial decisions like this. To me, this is one of the most important developmental benchmarks for a writer, one that unfortunately has never been thoroughly researched and that our testing systems don't adequately validate.

After learning about writing captions from another teacher, and experimenting with it a bit in my own teaching, I have been surprised at how rich it is. I have done lessons on all traits of writing using captions as the form. It is especially good for lessons on Word Choice and Sentence Fluency. But best of all are the lessons on Conventions that I can do when we're working on captions. Because we're usually working with just a sentence or two at the most, it is well within the abilities of all writers to take full responsibility for all corrections in pursuit of producing writing that is 100% conventionally correct. Often, the first publishing I have kids do is the publishing of a caption. And if I'm working with a group of kids who really struggle with conventions, we do a lot of publishing of very short authentic forms.

Putting it All Together

Julie: What seemed at first to be a fairly simple strategy, turned out to be much deeper and more complicated. We ended up doing several mini-lessons on differ-

ent things in order for everyone to get comfortable with it and to be successful. Many of these lessons involved shared writing. I would draw sketches on the board and we would test out different captions together. The students had to choose which one I should put with my sketch in order to have the sentence really be about the sketch. Eventually, I decided to use the time we were spending on this strategy to teach them about the writing process as well. To accomplish this, we took a topic and used Draw-Label-Caption as a way of going all the way from Pre-writing to Publishing which they fulfilled by producing a colored illustration and re-copying their caption in their best handwriting after having edited it for conventions. Though we spent more time on this strategy than I had planned, I concluded that it was time well spent. The kids seemed to need this time, and a trip through the Writing Process with it, to really understand how it worked. And I think I needed it, too.

Teachable Moment

Steve Peha: *For me, one of the best things about the Writer's Workshop format is how it encourages and supports the idea of instruction through teachable moments. I don't know what it is exactly but there's just something about the quality of the interaction between teacher and students in a well run Writer's Workshop that creates space for natural teaching opportunities.*

Magical Beginnings

Julie Bumgardner: In Writer's Workshop, the kids are writing fiction stories based on The Five Facts of Fiction strategy. They have really taken to it, and are really wanting to write. We have spent the past 3 or 4 days just writing, sharing what they have so far, revising, and writing some more.

Today, a girl named Destiny was sharing her new beginning because she had scrapped her old one. She wanted questions from her audience to help her put in more details and to see if it came across as she'd meant it to. Her story started, "Gabbie was in magic class pulling a rabbit out of a hat..." She went on to describe her character's personality and some problems she was having with some of her friends.

The first question she received was, "Why is she in magic class? Where is she?" Destiny's first response was, "I said that already, she's pulling a rabbit out of her hat, she's in magic class." The other student replied, "But why? Is she learning tricks?" Destiny replied, "No, she's a witch. She goes to magic school." I stepped in for a moment and said, "Oh! You didn't tell us that yet! Can you put that in?" We talked for a bit about why it was important for the reader to know that, there were many possible scenarios: maybe she's taking a special summer school class to learn tricks, maybe she was learning to be a magician, maybe it wasn't a normal school at all.

Destiny said she would add that detail in but, like most of the kids, she had a hard time with where and how to say it. I asked her what she wanted to say. She responded, "Well first, about Gabbie, that she's a witch." I did a quick little conference with her on her piece and showed her how to add a description into the sentence she already had: Gabbie, *a witch*, was in magic class pulling a rabbit out of a hat.

Bryan, who was sitting in the front row, heard me telling her about the commas and asked, "What were you saying about commas?" I looked up at him, told him that was a good question, and let the class know that Bryan had a good idea for a quick mini-lesson. I did a couple examples on the board similar to Destiny's sentence and showed the class how it worked when they wanted to describe who someone was or, really, add a descriptive phrase to just about anything.

Most of the students listened with interest, Bryan even made the connection to his own work. He said, "You mean I can say 'Wayne, a professional hockey player, was having a problem.'" I said, "Yes! that's a great way to say it!" It was very satisfying to have had the experience and knowledge that real teaching and real learning was actually taking place right then.

Steve: To me, what you describe here is as close to perfect teaching as you can get. First of all, you know that it's a good time for direct instruction because the kids are asking you to teach them something. Second, they've got their work in front of them so the can apply the lesson right away. Finally, everything is done "in context." You're really teaching a grammar and punctuation lesson here about using commas to set off a non-restrictive clause. But rather than using that vocabulary (which would never work for 2nd graders) or handing out some silly worksheet, you're showing them how to use it to solve a problem in their own writing.

Sharing Makes it Happen

Julie: As I was writing this, I started to get the feeling that it wasn't really about a teachable moment, it was about sharing. One of the fantastic things about sharing in Writer's Workshop is that it is a prime opportunity for teachable moments to happen. Bryan questioned, learned, understood, and applied. He got much more out of it than if I had, myself, decided to teach how to add a descriptive into a sentence with two comma. He probably wouldn't have cared much at all. It was meaningful to him because he could apply it to a problem in his own work, his desire for the knowledge came from him and not from a teacher, a curriculum, a standard, or a test.

Steve: You're right, I think, that sharing plays a big part in the creating of teachable moments. Often, when I don't know exactly what I want to teach, I will start out Writer's Workshop with sharing. I'll listen to a few kids to see where they are and as mini-lesson ideas come up, I'll jot them down in a corner of the blackboard. Then, after maybe 10 minutes of listening to kids read, I'll ask the class which of the lesson possibilities they would be most interested in looking at. We take a quick vote and off we go. Sometimes, asking the kids for permission in this way allows me to teach several lessons back to back in quick succession.

When Bad Tests Happen to Good Students

Steve Peha: *The experience Julie relates here, I'm sad to say, is all too common these days. In the spirit of ed reform, a small number of teachers like Julie have taken it upon themselves to bring their teaching in line with research-based "best practice." But in so doing, they find that the abilities and attitudes their students develop run counter to what they are tested on. Ironically, the very skills that are so highly valued in our universities, in the workplace, and in our communities (individual initiative, personal accountability, "outside the box" thinking, real world creative problem solving, emotional intelligence, team play, constructive cooperation, etc.) often prove detrimental to a student's success on tests. What's even worse is that teaching these things can actually hamper an educator's ability to rise in his or her career.*

Hey, Kids! Guess What Time it Is?

Julie Bumgardner: The time is upon us to test, test, test. We have a packet of post tests given to us by Title I and the district for tabulating data on student progress in reading and writing, we have all the report card tests including math and language, and then other grade levels have state standardized tests. Some parts of the building are so filled with test stress I'm surprised the windows haven't blown. The principals were chewed out and were told to chew us out ("If you're not willing to do this, and if you're not willing to do that..." *We wouldn't even be here,* I replied under my breath). And so began my Thursday with a sour feeling throughout.

The district wants the numbers, in each classroom, of how many students are a year or more below grade level in reading. Third grade wanted to meet with us (2nd grade) to give us a list of guidelines to follow and to try to squeeze in to our teaching in order to prepare next year's 3rd graders for the MAP, the big state test, the results of which can determine student placement, district accreditation, and Title I funding. Some of this test prep included responding to writing prompts, answering two-part questions properly, how to repeat back information read, etc.

I was not aware of the level of stress in the building until I talked to some of the other teachers about it (which made me feel a little guilty for not being aware, yet glad that I wasn't a part of it.) Whether I like it or not, tests must be taken, scores recorded, and results sent back to the district. It's just part of how things are right now and there doesn't seem to be much that anyone can do about it.

Steve: Though it seems daunting, some progress is being made. For one thing, whether the current testing mania is good or bad, at least people are talking about results. For the first time in our nation's history, there is a national dialog going on about the quality of teaching and learning, for once education matters. People all over the country are voicing their opinions about this new wave of testing. Two recent books on the subject are *One Size Fits Few: The Folly of Educational Standards* by Susan Ohanian, published by Heinemann; and *The Schools Our Children Deserve: Moving Beyond Traditional Classrooms and Tougher Standards* by Alfie Kohn, published by Houghton Mifflin. Both of these books are critical of the testing culture that has arisen in the last decade. So far, I haven't seen any books that speak positively about testing but there is evidence in the test score data that schools are improving, at least at the elementary level. Middle and high schools are more or less flat. What we don't know yet is whether these elementary kids are really learning more or if they're just getting better test preparation and have more familiarity with the test formats. Another wonderful book, though not specifically related to testing, is Regie Routman's *Literacy at the Crossroads*, also published by Heinemann. Ms. Routman's book discusses the politics of education and provides valuable background information about many important issues in education reform.

For my part, I try to do two things to help people with testing. First of all, I have developed highly effective test preparation workshops and materials. This helps kids get higher scores easily regardless of their ability levels. If I can help a school raise its scores by 10 or 20 points with just a couple weeks of test prep, they can have the rest of the year to make real improvements in teaching practice. My goal with the test prep stuff is simply to help teachers take some of the pressure off. Nobody does their best work under pressure.

The second thing I try to do is to explain to people how the tests are created, how they're scored, how the results are used, what they really measure, etc. I feel that the best way to change the testing system is simply to tell people about how it works and then let them decide for themselves. I have great faith in human nature. I think most of the negative things that happen in schools simply result from people not having accurate and complete information.

Much of what I have learned about state testing sytems comes to me from Willy Wood, the former Communication Arts consultant for the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Willy was responsible for working on the original reading and writing tests for the Missouri Assessment Program. He and I have talked many times about testing, standards, and the pace of education reform. He knows the system from the inside; he's seen what goes on from a position that most of us will never have.

I feel more or less the same way he does about the current testing system: it's not ideal but it's all we have and it's better than the fill-in-the-bubble tests of the past. Willy points out that the tests become more valid as the sample size increases. For example, the tests are not that accurate for predicting the ability level of a single child. But they *can* be a reasonable measure of school with 500 kids, and they are a very appropriate instrument for ditricts with 5000. And that's the way the data should be used: not to fire a teacher or to prevent a child from graduating but for schools and districts to make long term strategic decisions about curriculum and instructon that benefit the school community as a whole.

Testing has been a part of our education system since the early 1900s. It's just part of school. So I say don't fight it, invite it. The best way to challenge the tesing system is to beat it. Most of the schools I work with pick up 20-40 points on their scores over 2-3 years. If every kid gets the same high score, the test becomes less important and the testing system less necessary.

If everyone works together, and we do what makes sense, it's not that hard to raise scores. My hope is that once the scores get high enough — up into the 80s and 90s — we really won't need so much testing anymore. At that point, we could, for example, use statistical sampling and test only 1 out or every 20 kids, and not so many grade levels or subjects, thus reducing the national testing budget by billions of dollars each year, dollars that could be put into training to help teachers teach more effectively. But at the moment, millions of kids really aren't doing as well as they could, and testing is the only approach our education system is familiar with. It might be another generation or two before our country warms up to more effective, more efficient, and less costly approaches to assessing the quality of teaching and learning.

The other thing I try to keep in mind is that the tests themselves are not the issue, we are. What matters is not how many tests we give but how we choose to respond to the tests. If teachers teach to the tests and not to their students, this is a problem. If schools deny educational opportunities to kids on the basis of test scores, this is a problem. If parents impose reward-punishment systems on their children based on test scores, this is a problem. If politicians use test scores to make social policy, this is a problem. If we all promote feelings of anxiety around testing to our peers and to our students, this is a *huge* problem because it undermines our collective effectiveness. Whenever I feel myself getting upset about testing, I try to take the accountable position: I'm a part of the system, too. I have a resonsibility to act, in a constructive way, on behalf of the students and teachers I serve. It doesn't help anyone — espeically myself — if I just sit back and complain about things.

Personally, I do not oppose testing. To me, that's sort of like opposing the weather. I live in Seattle; it's always cloudy. Does that mean I spend my day pining for the sun? We've always had tests and we always will; testing is just part of our culture. The powers that be certainly have the right to impose testing (after all, we elected them), and those of us who choose to participate in the system really do need to go along and at least administer the tests to our students. Kids need to take the tests and do their best on them; parents need to send their kids to school to be tested or pay to send their kids to private schools; state needs to report results and pay for the testing systems; schools need to analyze those results, draw reasonable conclusions from, and take responsible, appropriate action to make improvements. Everyone must participate fully. You don't not get up in the morning just because it looks a little cloudy, right?

Though I do not like the current climate, I remain optimistic that its positive aspects will endure long after the negatives have been discovered and discarded. And there are some positive aspects. Most importantly, for the first time in our nation's history, we are looking at the connection between quality teaching and quality learning. We may not be looking at it as accurately as I would like, but we are looking nonetheless. For once it really does matter how well someone teaches and how much their students learn.

Only good can come of this kind of shift in our attitudes. I also think that there will be important changes in administrative and teacher professionalism as well because the drive for better results will force educators to adopt more professional attitudes and use some of the same approaches to quality and performance that have long been used in the business world.

Most of us don't like tests; that's normal. Teachers oppose testing for their own certification. I don't see administrators and school board members lining up to take tests for their jobs. Parents would surely oppose testing for the right to bear and raise children (as would any sane person). Business leaders and politicians would oppose testing themselves, seeking instead more authentic measures of ability like profits or votes. I suspect that over time, we will all come to see that

there are better ways of making improvement and imposing accountability on our education system than tests, ways that are already present and well understood, and widely used in other parts of our society.

By the year 2010, I think our current testing system will be in the throes of yet another great change because the current approach will be shown to have limited value relative to its extremely high cost. Knowing that one child got a 46 while another got a 64 doesn't give a teacher the specific information she needs to help either of them. Knowing that a school's reading scores went down by 4% or up by 9% over a three-year period provides only the vaguest notion of what might be going on in classrooms and how that might be changed for the better. It's not that this kind of data isn't helpful. It's that it isn't helpful enough. A different kind of assessment is required, one that supplies us with more direct and more practical information about students and teachers than the reductive, inauthentic standardized approaches of the past.

The truth is that our current approach to testing is simply too expensive relative to the benefit it provides. Everyone knows that the best way to improve learning is to improve teaching. And the best way to do that is to provide teachers with high quality training and the support they need to put that training into practice in their classrooms. Every dollar spent to test a child is a dollar lost for teaching a child. Fortunately, Americans are very sensitive to this kind of bang-for-the-buck analysis. I like to think of it as a simple "dollars and sense" argument: it just doesn't make sense to spend dollars on testing when we could be spending dollars on teaching and learning.

The Problem is. . .

Julie: In our Writer's Workshop we don't really do any prompted writing. Kids write better when they pick their own topics, and since helping them write better is the goal, this is what we do. But all of a sudden it seemed that prompted writing was the only thing that mattered: the Title I test I had to give included a

prompt, the 3rd grade teachers asked us to practice writing to prompts, this is the only kind of writing the district seems interested in, and it looks like the kids are going to have to face them often throughout their remaining years in school.

Even though I don't use prompts in my own teaching, I figured my kids ought to know how to deal with them. I also thought it was important for them to learn how to answer test questions in the contrived academic forms that would be acceptable to those doing the scoring. Deciding to do this was hard for me because I don't agree with this type of assessment. Specifically, I don't agree that these tests accurately measure student writing ability because students are not going to "really write" when forced to write about a particular topic, especially if they have little to say about it. This kind of testing only assesses how well students respond to arbitrarily selected test questions on a given day, a situation that few of us ever face in our real lives (unless we end up on some silly game show!), and that I would never intentionally create in my classroom. Still, this was something they had to do, and I wanted them to do as well as they could, so I introduced the idea to them in a mini-lesson on writing to prompts.

Steve: The position you take here, of deciding to prepare kids for tests even though the preparation and testing run counter to your instincts, is for me the appropriate position to take. Teach in accordance with "best practice" research throughout the year and spend a small amount of time, right before testing begins, to introduce students to the particulars of the testing format.

For me, it's easiest to think of writing for a test as another genre of writing. We do genre studies all the time. We teach kids about fiction, about poetry, about journalism, and many other kinds of writing. Why not treat test writing this way, too? Whether we like it or not it is a kind of writing kids will encounter. And even if its only purpose is to sort people into categories, we can still teach kids about this so they can have some control over the categories into which they are sorted. Most of the time, when we do a genre study in reading or writing, we take 3-6 weeks of class time at the most. So, it seems to me that we need not take any more time than this to prepare kids for testing. We certainly don't need to "teach to the test" all year long.

Boy, Was I Surprised When…

Julie: I started out by explaining to the kids what a "prompt" was and did an example of one on chart paper. I prepared them with the knowledge that this wasn't "really writing" like we'd learned it, but it was something they needed to know how to do. The kids were taken aback at the idea of not choosing their own topics, confused looks were popping up on faces all over the room. To make them feel more comfortable, I explained that they could use everything we had learned about writing, all the Pre-writing strategies to focus your ideas, think of more details, etc. They seemed to be able to accept this. Then the bomb dropped.

I explained that a lot of times the tests that these prompts are on are ones where you have to write the whole thing at once and you can't discuss it out loud; you've got to do all the steps in the Writing Process by yourself and at a single sitting. "What!?" the kids exclaimed. I was bombarded with questions: "How are we going to see what the audience thinks?" "How are we going to ask questions to get more details?" "How are we going to make it better?" "What if we feel stuck and we need to share t o get help to get more ideas?" Etc.

Steve: This has happened to me, too. In fact, it has happened so many times that it was starting to bother me. For a few years I wasn't sure what to do about it. But this year, working with a 3rd grade teacher, something different happened. When the class got to spring testing time, the kids actually wanted to take the tests. And when the tests were over, the feedback we got was that the testing was "easy" and "fun". There were certainly kids who asked when we were going to get back to real writing, real reading, and real math, but aside from being a bit bored they weren't unhappy about the testing in any way.

What was different this time? It certainly wasn't more test prep. In fact, the teacher did very little. But she didn't ignore the test either. She told them about it long before it came up and referred to it throughout the year even she we wasn't doing "test prep." She was excited, too. She wanted to do well and she communicated that to her students without making them feel pressured in any way. Without changing the way she taught, she tried to make the kids feel comfortable and

confident about the testing that was to come. In the end, this seems to have been successful. In addition to enjoying the testing, the students received the highest scores in the school, scoring 10%-15% better in all subjects relative to the average scores of the five other 3rd grade classes in their school.

The conclusion I draw is that while we certainly shouldn't teach to the test, we shouldn't ignore it either. These tests are just another learning challenge like a new form of writing, a new kind of reading, or a new unit in math. If we approach the testing with confidence and composure, our kids will, too. Far from being afraid of tests, the 3rd graders I followed this year were eager to be tested, to show others what they had learned, to make themselves, their parents, and their teacher proud. It is experiences like this that make me think hard about whether "test anxiety" comes from the test or from us.

Every Cloud Has a Silver Lining

Julie: For the first time I can remember, I felt success from my students confusion. They really do get it, I thought. They understand what it takes to be real writers. Granted, they will have to develop the habit of re-reading and asking themselves the questions that their readers reader would, but clearly they learned some of the most important things about what writing is and how to do it well.

To help them with the requirements of the testing situation, I talked to them about "writing like a reader", that they would not only have to know what they wanted to say but would also need to think about how a reader would respond without actually having a reader there to tell them. I told them that I knew this was a hard and unnatural thing to do, but that it was just another part of writing, just like all the other parts we had learned. I gave them some tips on how to develop their story without sharing it or having a conference. We talked about re-reading it and pretending you are the audience, then asking yourself a question that you think someone else might, trying to find parts that someone might have a question about to add more detail, and so on.

Steve: I suspect that one of the reasons kids have problems n testing situations is simply that writing for tests isn't very interesting. In Writer's Workshop classrooms, the kids get interested in writing. They also enjoy the social interaction that comes from listening to the writing of others, from conferences, small group sharing, etc. When they get to the tests, some of which go on for several days, they get bored, and their boredom translates into lackluster performance.

In my experience working with kids at all grade levels all across the country, I find that in those classrooms where Writer's Workshop is practiced, writing is the kids' favorite subject. They really enjoy it and come to look forward to it each day, so much so that they become upset when for any reason they aren't able to write. It's another of the unfortunate ironies of testing (which is now dominated by writing) that kids who love to write should be the most negatively impacted. The standard rationale for prohibiting sharing, conferencing, and using the Writing Process over several days is that there is no way to know for sure how much of the writing was actually done by the writer. But it occurs to me that never in nearly 20 years of professional writing have I had to produce something of any importance without being able to share it with others, get feedback, use writing reference materials, and receive assistance of all kinds. In fact, one of the things that makes me a successful professional writer is that I have a talent for seeking out feedback and using it to improve my work. The first time I got paid for a magazine article, my editor said, "Great story! Can you knock it down to 750 words and get it to me by Tuesday?" He didn't say, "Did you get any help with this?"

Good Prompt, Bad Prompt

Julie: We finished the example prompt and I gave them the post test. They had answered it before, during the pre-test at the beginning of the year. I felt that we were lucky because the prompt was based on a personal experience but unlucky because the type of experience was not something all of my students had had: "Write a story about an experience you've had with an animal." A few kids did not have experiences to choose from, and I talked with them until we found a

time they went to a friend's house where a pet lived, or a time they went to a pet store, or something they might have seen in their backyard, etc. Then they wrote.

I couldn't conference, they couldn't share, we all got frustrated. The pieces turned out to be flops (as did the kids' pieces in the other 2nd grade classrooms). But I knew they would.

Although I know I will have to work more on teaching my students how to answer prompts successfully and to write without authentic interaction, the fact my kids' pieces were so bad doesn't really bother me. I know that they have become good writers, that they are learning how to express themselves through written language, and that they understand what real writing is. Granted, some are still struggling and are not as good at this as others, but they all have the essential knowledge and solid strategies they need to develop into talented and passionate writers—real writers writing about real things that really matter to real readers.

Steve: This has happened to me, too. Two years ago, I had a group of kids answer a prompt. The pieces were short and uninspired. They were so different from their normal Writer's Workshop writing that I had everyone take out their last published piece and compare it with the piece they had written to the prompt. They noticed the difference immediately but they didn't care. I was confused. "Why are your prompted pieces so bad compared to your Writer's Workshop pieces?" I asked. They laughed. "Mr. Peha, this is school writing," one kid said. "So what?" I responded. To which he replied: "In Writer's Workshop we don't do this kind of writing, we do the good kind of writing." At times like this, I feel like the kids should be teaching me!

Another interesting test anecdote came to me this spring from Rosemary Leifer, a 4th grade teacher in Renton, WA with whom I have worked for several years now. Rosemary is one of the finest teachers I have ever met and she is particularly good with writing. Normally, she runs a typical Writer's Workshop for about an hour each day, but recently she's been focusing on writing for our state test.

Here's what she had to say:

> Dear Steve,
>
> You will appreciate this. For the last three weeks of school we have been spending at least two hours a day on writing. They write to prompts, we write to prompts together, we share samples of the best of the responses and ones that need to be improved and we discuss what should be done. We have been writing, writing, writing.
>
> So Tyler says to me last Friday, "Mrs. Leifer, when are we going to start writing again?" I said, "Tyler, what do you mean? We have been writing and writing and writing." He said, "But that's writing to prompts, not real writing. Real writing is when you have your own ideas and you think about them and share them with other people to get more ideas. Real writing is much more interesting. I am a much better real writer than I am a prompt writer."
>
> When I told him as soon as we finished testing we would be back to real writing, he was much relieved. "Real writing is my favorite thing to do."
>
> Sincerely,
>
> Rosemary

Clearly, this student is a writer, or as he might put it a "real writer." And real writers (even very young ones) know that what they are being asked to do on these tests is not real writing. I think it's also interesting that this student realizes, as many of us have been saying for years, that he writes much better in "real" life than he does on tests.

So why does it take a 9-year old kid to say the things that need to be said? If we're not testing "real writing" what are we testing? Is it smart to base decisions about teaching and learning on tests that do not accurately reflect the teaching and learning that has occurred? And if a 4th grader can figure this out, why can't the President of the United States understand it, too?

Writer's Workshop: One Day at a Time

Steve Peha: *In August of 2002, I got a chance to work with Julie once again during our annual summer professional development institute in Independence, MO. One afternoon, over lemonade at Tippin's restaurant, we talked about writing projects. Julie wanted to continue her writings and asked if I had any good topic suggestions. All through the year, teachers had been asking me for day-by-day Writer's Workshop lesson plans. Of course, I didn't have anything like that; you can't make daily lesson plans for Writer's Workshop because the whole point of doing it in the first place is to follow the kids — their needs determine daily scope and sequence, not a plan book, a curriculum guide, or a publisher's program. What many teachers seemed to want was some kind of guide that would tell them what to do on a daily basis. But that just isn't an effective way to learn how to teach and we didn't want to create something so prescriptive that it would probably make teachers even more dependent on canned curriculum than they already are. Instead, we decided to create something descriptive: a day-by-day record of Julie's actual teaching during her first time through the writing process in Writer's Workshop at the beginning of the school year.*

"Q: How do you eat a purple elephant? A: One bite at a time."

Julie Bumgardner: Starting Writer's Workshop this year was a daunting task for me. I was excited because I believed it was what I'd been looking for and I felt it would work. But I was scared because I was relying on something I'd never done before and I didn't quite know how to make it happen in my classroom. I was, however, determined to try — one "bite" at a time!

Steve: I remember talking to you, Julie, about your feelings regarding Writer's Workshop. What struck me was your commitment to the kids. I remember you telling me that what you'd been doing for the first few years of your teaching just never felt right and that you knew there had to be something better. Even though you were scared, you kept trying things until finally Writer's Workshop seemed to make sense. Then you put all your energy behind it.

To me, this is what it means to be a great teacher. Most of the time, especially when we're just starting out, we don't really know what to do. We try many things, most of which don't work. The trick is not to give up, to always keep looking for something that makes sense for us and for our kids. And then, when we find it, we just have to move forward even though we're scared.

Setting Up

Julie: Getting the students organized helps me with management. On our beginning-of-the-year supply list, we asked for specific colored folders among other things. Each student gets a red notebook and a folder for Writers Workshop. I print out a sheet of address labels with the words "Writing Notebook" and "Writing Folder" so each student's things are labeled.

Steve: Many of the teachers I work with have found it ideal to give the kids two places to put their writing work: a spiral notebook of some kind, usually for drafting, and either a folder for primary kids or a three-ring binder for older kids that they can use to keep loose papers.

Julie: On one of the walls in my classroom, I made and started using writing process posters. They begin as blank laminated charts, each titled with one of the six steps of the writing process — prewriting, drafting, revising, sharing, editing, and publishing. We fill them in together with our procedures and strategies as we get to each stage.

Steve: This is my favorite approach to getting the year started. Building the procedures around the writing process seems to work best for me, and filling out the posters with the kids as we go along seems to help them internalize things more effectively.

Julie: Because I'm so procedure oriented, I usually don't start Writer's Workshop until the third day of school. The first two days are filled with getting to know each other, seeing where kids stand academically, classroom rules, etc. I also like to take them through the entire writing process with our first piece, and I don't feel ready to begin a chunk that big the first couple of days when some are still testing me and my authority is being established.

Steve: Though I don't know too many Writer's Workshop teachers that start their year off exactly this way, I can see that it has some advantages. All the kids are together so it's a little easier to keep track of things. Everyone gets to see the whole process early in the year so they know what to expect later on. And you get to focus on procedures. I can also see how this tight structure might be helpful in the primary grades where a teacher might face a very large range of abilities and attention spans.

Julie: Ideally, I would like to teach and do one step of the writing process each day. In fact, I always plan each year that way. But because my Writer's Workshop time this year is a little shorter than I'd like it to be, first-time procedures take extra time, and I'm into a lot of explanation, so I don't usually end up with a six day start. The following was how it worked out this year.

Steve: When I asked Julie to record how she starts her Writer's Workshop, we joked that she'd have to make two sets of plans: what was supposed to happen and what actually happened. I think she did a pretty good job here of staying with her original plan. It doesn't always go that way, and one of the things I like about workshop-style teaching is how flexible it is with regard to planning. If something takes a day or two longer than it should have, there's really no problem.

Day One

Julie: We started with a "How it works" mini-lesson. I start by telling the class that we will be doing Writer's Workshop this year. If they have done it before, I tell them that some of what we do will be like what they already know, but that we do more with it in second grade. I point out the writing process posters and tell them that these are the steps writers use to write, and that through the year they will learn all the steps in order and how to do each one. We also briefly go over our "writing time" rules.

I start with the Topic T-Chart strategy: things we like and things we dislike. Most of my kids remembered that they did it last year in first grade. We discuss what the word "topic" means: "A topic is what a piece is mainly about, it's the main thing you're going to talk about in your story."

Steve: I like that you took some time here to go over what a topic was. Many kids don't know what a topic is and that can lead to a lot of confusion — especially with the difference between "topic" and "main idea." I like how you said that a topic is "what a piece is mainly about." Later, when you introduce main idea, your kids will easily be able to tell the difference when you explain to them that the main idea is "the one most important thing you want your audience to know" about your topic. Understanding how topic and main idea relate to each other is so important and I think you're setting it up well here.

Julie: I give each student a brightly colored blank piece of paper. Modeling, with my own paper attached to the chalkboard, I write the date at the top and the words "Topic T-Chart" as a title. After directing them to make the "T" by drawing one line across and then another one down, we discuss why this strategy might have the name that it does.

We write "Like" on one side and "Dislike" on the other. Briefly, I explain what a list is and what it isn't. I compare it to a grocery list, telling them we will be listing things we like and dislike on this T-Chart.

We stop, put pencils down, and some close their eyes as I guide them to think about things they really like: things they like to do, to eat, places they've gone, things they get excited about, etc. I remind them of the writing time rules and that writing often includes quiet, undisturbed thinking.

Steve: It's great to reinforce rules and procedures as you go along.

Julie: They write their own lists on the "Like" side as I model by doing my own. We share a few things we've written and then do the same for the "Dislike" side. We close by taking out our writing folders, putting the T-Charts inside, and discussing that all loose writing papers (and only the loose ones) will go in this folder.

Steve: A great opening day. The only product your kids produced here was a couple of lists but they learned so many procedures. This will pay off for you later on when your class becomes more independent. You were able to start them out at a relaxed pace that was obviously comfortable for you and for them, too. I think one of my problems is that I go too fast at the beginning of the year. We get a lot of writing done and everyone has a good time, but I often find myself reviewing things — especially procedures — more often than I think I should have to. By going slow, and concentrating on the process and procedures, you're more likely to produce an easier, more well-managed class later on.

Day Two

Julie: We all take out our writing folders and remove our Topic T-Charts from yesterday. We review what a Topic T-Chart is and how it can help us make lists of potential writing topics. I explain that although they will have the chance to write about many of these topics during the year, today they will chose just one to start with.

I give them time to look at their lists and come to a decision. When most of the class gives me a thumbs up, telling me they know which one they want to choose, I ask them to circle the topic on their list. I'm still modeling on my own paper. I try to make sure that I model everything I want them to do. This is probably the best way to make sure they follow directions and don't get lost.

Steve: I couldn't agree with you more. In fact, I've often wondered if I could run a Writer's Workshop almost solely on modeling — at least for a few days. I have found that modeling is the most effective way of communicating what I want kids to do. It's better than direct instruction because not every kid is going to interpret my directions in the same way. But when they can see me doing it right in front of them, they know exactly what I'm looking for. Modeling also helps me build community. I'm a writer just like them. It's the perfect ice breaker. Sometimes, I'll open a Writer's Workshop class with me modeling. I'll write a few sentences about something that may have just happened to me and I'll ask them what they think. They love helping me with my own writing and I find that this kind of simple interaction lays the groundwork for sharing, conferencing, and revision.

Julie: I now bring the prewriting poster to the front of the room and we discuss what prewriting means. We break it down to "pre" and "writing" and from there we come up with idea that prewriting is all the things we do "before writing." I write this on the chart. Then we write "Topic T-Chart" as the first prewriting strategy that we have learned.

Steve: It's so good for the kids to see their learning go right up on a chart in the room. A good classroom should be covered with charts like this. Anyone entering the room should be able to tell what the kids are learning, what the classroom procedures are, and what kinds of criteria everyone is using to assess performance. I have also discovered one other advantage of this approach: it helps me remember what I've taught. I'm not the most organized person and I really don't like to keep a plan book because I know I'm always going to follow the kids regardless of what I have planned. So, putting up on a chart the things we've

learned, as we learn them, is really the best way for me to keep track of things. It's also useful for a sub or other guest teacher.

Julie: I have the class take out their writing notebook and turn to the first blank page. On chart paper, I draw where the spiral edge, holes, and margin will be if they have it turned the right way on their desk (many kids still have trouble with this at the beginning of the year). Then I show them where I want them to draw a line across the page as we prepare for our next prewriting strategy.

Now I introduce the Draw-Label-Caption strategy. In this strategy, kids draw a picture representing their topic, label different parts of the picture, and write a short caption underneath. We start by talking about how a D-L-C lets us focus on our idea like a camera: it shows us some important thing that we will concentrate on in our story. At this point, we talk about what belongs in the picture: it has to be something they really did, something they can really remember, and they have to be in the picture because this is a story about them. Then, we do a quick pencil sketch — rough shapes and lines only, no shading or coloring, stick people are just fine. And that's all we end up having time for.

Steve: I know that time is a little tighter this year than you would like and that you're not able to get quite as much done in each class period as you might under normal circumstances. The truth is that we really need 50-60 minutes each day in a workshop-style subject. But when we can't get that kind of time, we can still be successful by doing exactly what you're doing here: chunking things up into smaller pieces but still moving along thoughtfully making sure that every succeeding step follows logically from the one before.

Day Three

Julie: Everyone takes out their writing notebooks and turns to their Draw-Label-Caption from the day before. We review what we've done and why. I often find that I open Writer's Workshop like this: by going over what we did yesterday and

why we did it. This seems to be especially helpful — both to me and the kids — at the beginning of the year.

Steve: Shelley Harwayne, former principal at PS 290 in New York and now a superintendent, tells a funny story in one of her books about having Lucy Calkins observe her one day during Writer's Workshop. Apparently, Lucy told Shelley that she loved her mini-lesson. The problem was that Shelley didn't think she'd taught one that day. Turns out that all Shelley asked her kids to do was re-read what they'd written the previous day before starting into writing time. From Shelley's point of view this was hardly a lesson. And yet, to Lucy Calkins, one of the inventors of Writer's Workshop, it was exactly the kind of thing she liked to see — a truly "mini" lesson, in this case, a lesson in re-reading, a simple strategy many young writers often neglect. For me, the mini-lesson in this little story is that it's often a good idea to have the kids briefly review the previous day's efforts. Of course, what I like best about this kind of lesson is that it takes very little time and almost no preparation on my part other than reminding myself to do it.

Julie: Labeling is quick and easy. I tell them they will be "sound spelling" and we go over the "Say it slowly" poster. This is a great strategy for sounding out words that I have used for a couple of years now. It's really just a short poem that describes a process for identifying letter sounds and writing them down: "Say it slowly. Hold the sound. Find the letter. Write it down." Even kids with very little experience can begin to get parts of words down almost immediately. It's important to me to make sure every child can do some actual writing right away in Writer's Workshop. This sounding out strategy has been a big help in getting kids started. It also works well with our district phonemic awareness program.

Steve: I like "Say it slowy" too. In fact, I use it every day at the primary grades as part of Daily Shared Writing. It's a perfect compliment to most phonics/phonemic awareness programs because it provides an authentic application of the sound-symbol knowledge kids are acquiring. It's the perfect connection between reading and writing at the primary grades.

Julie: I point out on my own picture how we will label things: by drawing a line that points to an object and writing down the sounds we hear. After doing a few labels on my paper, they get started. In just a few minutes, their papers are filled with labels, too.

Steve: For me, labeling has turned out to be the perfect transition between writing words and writing sentences. Getting kids to write their first words — with invented spelling, of course — was always easy for me. But it might take months before they could produce a string of words that resembled a sentence. Now, all I have to do is have them label, and then give them a few Word Wall, and then they can quickly make sentences simply by taking the "function" words ("I", "me", "at", "am", "and", etc.) and popping in a couple of their labels. For example, to write the sentence, "I am playing with my dog," kids just have to invent-spell "playing" and "dog" (which they can do easily with the "Say it slowly" strategy) and then they can get the rest of the words from the Word Wall. Even in a kindergarten classroom, I can usually get most kids writing single sentences in a week or two. Of course, multiple sentences is a whole other story. I still haven't figured out a good transition to that.

Julie: We then discuss what a caption is, relating it to comics and pictures in the newspaper. I tell them it is one sentence telling what they are doing in the picture, and I write a caption for my drawing. I purposely leave out a couple of minor details so that it will be ready for the sharing and revising step later.

My sentence says, "I am playing with my cat while she is on the bed." We discuss how the sentence matches the picture and do a few examples where it doesn't. They write their own captions, under the line, in a complete sentence.

After completing this activity, we write Draw-Label-Caption on our prewritng poster. I mention that because this is a prewriting strategy, it will at all other times be used only to get ideas ready for a story. This time, however, we are going to use it to talk about all the steps of the writing process. I touch on how drafting is starting to really write and that since this is going through the process, we had drafted

our sentences today. I spend a lot more time talking about drafting later. For now, I just want to get them all the way through process with a complete, published piece.

Steve: I like your emphasis early in the year on publishing. If kids don't learn to publish, they don't learn to write. Ideally, I like to see kids publishing 20-30 times each year. But in most classrooms, kids don't even publish once a month. Starting the year off with a push toward publishing, even if it is a bit abbreviated as it is here, makes sense because you're giving kids a chance to see what writing is like from start to finish. I think, also, that the feeling of accomplishment kids get from publishing, even when they're just publishing a caption, is worth a lot.

Day Four

Julie: Today I introduce sharing as a way to make our good pieces better. I read my caption and ask if anyone has a question about my sentence that would help them to understand it better. They ask the two questions I thought they would ("What were you playing with your cat?" and "What is your cat's name?") and I show them how I add the answers into my sentence: I use a carret to add that I was playing "with a shoestring" and show them how to use commas to add the name of my cat "...my cat, Owlie, while she...". We read the sentence the revised way to see how much better it sounds now.

Steve: Do you realize how much great stuff you just crammed into a five minute lesson? Not only did you cover the sharing-questioning-adding routine, you also worked in two editing lessons: (1) Use a carret to insert new text, and (2) Use a pair of commas to separate a non-essential phrase from the rest of a sentence. I know your kids won't remember all this, but it's a great way to expose them to more advanced lessons you'll be teaching more formally later on.

Next, I teach sharing procedures. I model where we will stand in the room (I have a tall stool in the front of the room they can stand behind or sit on), how to

hold the notebook so we can best hear their voice (I have them hold it out from their belly button so their mouth can be facing the audience but they can still see their words without covering their face), and what kind of voice to use to reach everyone's ears in the room.

Steve: I'm glad you took so much time here to do this in a detailed and thorough way. Most kids don't know how to share their writing for the simple reason that no one ever tells them.

Julie: I teach good audience skills, too: eyes and attention on the author, voices off, ears and minds listening to the author to understand and think of good questions to ask. We write these things on the sharing poster.

I use sharing to help with revising. We touch on what a good question is and I interject a lot with questions for the author and comments for the audience, trying to help guide them into good questioning while helping the author see how he or she might put the answers to these questions into the piece. Today I let each author get up to two questions and then I had them sit down to add what they'd been asked back into their piece. We only got halfway through the class.

Steve: That's OK. You can finish up tomorrow. Another one of the neat things I like about workshop-style teaching is that I can start any workshop with any part. Tomorrow, you can start with sharing if you like and just continue on from where you left off. It's also neat that every kid is going to share at least once on their way through the writing process. I think this helps kids get over their fear of sharing. If everyone does it during the first week of school, everyone is more or less in the same boat. Sharing isn't such a big deal and nobody ends up developing anxiety over it.

Day Five

Julie: I want everyone to get a chance to share, so we review what we learned yesterday and we continue in the same manner with the second half of the class. On the revising poster, we write "change it" as our first revising strategy.

Steve: Isn't it amazing how simple any given day can be in Writer's Workshop. Even if all you accomplished today was making sure everyone shared, got questions, and added something to their piece, you've accomplished a lot. And it really didn't require any planning time on your part.

Day Six

Julie: It's time to edit. I keep it very simple this first time. We talk about how editing is "fixing it" and write that on the poster. We discuss what editors do and what little things might need to be fixed once someone is done drafting and revising. We have a short discussion about where we need a capital letter, what the ending marks are, etc. I keep the focus on complete sentences and their parts. Basically, all I talk about at this point is that the sentence has to make sense (no words left out or in the wrong order), capital letters where needed, lower case letters for all the other letters, and that it ends with an ending mark, usually a period but we do have an occasional exclamation mark here and there. All the while, I'm writing this stuff on our editing poster.

Each student edits their own paper as we look for each of the criteria I have described one at a time. They end up reading their sentence about four times, editing for one thing each time. I then have them do a quick peer edit where the person next to them reads their sentence to see if there is anything they might have missed. They talk about it for a few minutes, change anything that they found, and we are done for the day.

Steve: This is a perfect research-based lesson on conventions because you're doing the four most important things: **(1)** Teaching conventions during the editing stage of the writing process. **(2)** Teaching conventions in the context of authentic student writing. **(3)** Having kids address only one type of error at a time. **(4)** Teaching kids how to fix their own errors instead of relying on a teacher to do it for them.

Day Seven

Julie: Finally, publishing! I start by talking about what publishing is. I show them a book from the room, a newspaper, and a note I sent home to their parents. I talk about how everything they just did over the last six days had to be done to these things before they were published. Publishing means the "final copy," and we write that on the poster.

Steve:I take a similar approach the first time I publish with a new class. I tell them that the word "publish" comes from Latin and is derived form the word "public". To publish something is to make it ready for the public.

Julie: There are many things we have to talk about before we can publish, things like where they will get the paper from, that we always skip lines, that it will be our best work and our neatest writing, and most importantly that it is copying exactly what they have with the changes written in. No more changes happen, no more fixing should be needed, they don't write a new sentence (if one of these things *is* necessary, we need to go back to revising or editing). One of the common problems I see is kids not writing what they have already prepared during drafting and revising, so I really stress this one. It's so frustrating to hear, "You mean we were supposed to write *that* sentence?"

Julie: I pass out a sheet of loose leaf notebook paper and the kids publish their draw-label-caption, complete with labels, a colored illustration of the same sketch, and their completed sentence.

Steve:I'm glad you addressed the "What do I copy?" problem. Most kids, especially little ones, don't know that that's what they are supposed to do. The worst part for me is when they copy their original writing — including the errors — and ignore all the edits they've put in. This is a good reminder for all of us that we have to teach explicitly. We absolutely have to show kids, mostly through modeling but also through discussion, exactly what it is we need them to do.

Day Eight

Julie: Today we review the steps of the writing process by briefly reviewing the posters. I want to assess how much really sunk in so we review how to choose a topic and how to do a D-L-C. Then I have them pick a new topic from their T-charts, turn to the next blank page in their writing notebook, and do their own Draw-Label-Caption — this time I'm not modeling. Everyone gets done and I collect their notebooks to check how they did while they go to PE. Happily, I see most of them ended up doing a pretty decent job!

Steve: This is a great validation of your approach during the previous seven days. In less than two weeks, right at the beginning of the school year, you've taken a brand new bunch of second graders and taught them how to write. Congratulations on a job well done! I can tell it's going to be a great year.

The "Writer's Workshop" Organizer

★ MINI-LESSON 5-15 Minutes

A mini-lesson is a short piece of direct instruction focused on a single topic. Mini-lessons fall into three categories:

Procedures: Anything writers need to do to participate effectively in the workshop: How to get paper; How to store and organize writing; How to request a conference; How to conduct sharing, and so on.

Strategies Writers Use: This is the "how" of writing, as in "How do I pick a good topic?" or "How do I write a good lead?" These lessons are best organized around the writing process.

Qualities of Good Writing: These lessons are designed to introduce students to examples of good writing. They involve reviewing and analyzing models of good writing using the language of your classroom criteria. These kinds of lessons often come up naturally during reading time or teacher modeling.

Mini-lessons work best when: 1) They are suggested by the students; 2) They are taught in the context of authentic student writing; 3) The teacher models for students as the lesson is delivered.

YOU DON'T NEED TO GIVE A MINI-LESSON EVERY DAY!

★ CONFERENCING Durning Writing Time

During writing time you have a chance to work individually with students who need specific help. The keys to successful conferencing are good management and consistent execution.

Management: The key to all successful management is having good procedures in place. Students need to be able to: 1) Know when the teacher is available for a conference; 2) Request a conference in an appropriate way; 3) Be specific about what they want help with; and 4) Have all materials ready.

Execution: To keep conferences brief and make the most of your time, keep these things in mind: 1) Model conferences on whole class sharing; 2) Ask permission and/or start out with questions before you make recommendations; 3) Work on one thing at a time; 4) Before you leave the conference, make sure the student knows what to do.

Conferencing works best when: 1) Students know how to do it; 2) You stay focused on one thing at a time; 3) You keep conferences to less than five minutes; 4) You check back with students from time to time to see if they're following up on what you conferenced about.

CONFERENCING IS YOUR MOST IMPORTANT TEACHING TIME!

★ STATUS OF THE CLASS 2-5 Minutes

Status of the class is a quick way of finding out what students will be working on that day. There are several ways to do status of the class:

Out Loud: Students tell the teacher and the class what they're working on. They can tell the title, the topic, the form or genre, or the stage they are at in the writing process. Title, topic, and writing process stage are usually the most useful pieces of information.

Visually: Students indicate on some kind of chart in the room what they will be doing that day. Most of the charts I've seen allow writers to indicate where they are in the writing process.

Recorded on Paper: Circulate a sheet of paper and ask each student to indicate what they will be doing that day. Some teachers record status even when it's done out loud.

Status of the class works best when: 1) You do it out loud; 2) You do it regularly; 3) Everyone can hear everyone else; 4) Students choose their own topics, forms, and genres, and manage their own way through the writing process.

STATUS OF THE CLASS IS A GREAT WAY TO BUILD COMMUNITY!

★ SHARING 5-15 Minutes

Sharing gives writers a chance to address a real audience and get valuable feedback about what and how they're doing. There are several ways to do sharing, each has its advantages and disadvantages:

Whole Class: Gives authors their best chance for feedback, but it takes a lot of time. On most days, you'll only be able to listen to a few kids. Best tool you have for building classroom community.

Small Group: Time efficient, but hard to manage. Very noisy. Kids easily get off track. Monitor each group by participating as a member.

Partner: Most time efficient but, with only one person in the audience, the feedback the writer receives is often not that valuable.

Sharing works best when: 1) It is voluntary; 2) The author asks the audience to listen for or help with something specific; 3) Kids with long pieces read only a short section; 4) You take an active part as an author and an audience member; 5) Students make constructive comments using the language of the classroom criteria; 6) Everyone knows that all comments, even yours, are suggestions only; 7) Students ask questions instead of making comments.

SHARING MUST WORK FOR BOTH AUTHOR AND AUDIENCE!

★ WRITING TIME 20-40 Minutes

Writing time is the centerpiece of the workshop and the longest workshop section. During writing time, students write. The teacher can::

Model: Work on your own writing. You can write at your desk or at the board or overhead. Allowing students to see what you write as you write it is very good for them. You will often discover your most valuable mini-lessons when you write in front of your students because you'll have to tackle the same problems that they do.

Conference: Work with individual students on their writing. This is your most valuable teaching time.

Small Group Mini-Lesson: While the majority of the class is writing, you can take a small group of students and deliver a mini-lesson.

Catch Up: Spend a few minutes on other work you have to do.

Writing time works best when: 1) Students have internalized effective classroom procedures; 2) Students write frequently, and for long periods of time, on a regular schedule; 3) You write with your students for at least a few minutes during most class periods.

WRITING TIME IS THE HEART OF THE WORKSHOP!

★ TIPS ★

- ★ Concentrate on classroom management by focusing on procedural mini-lessons at the beginning of the year.
- ★ If you have less than 40 minutes, drop the mini-lesson and sharing; start with a quick status of the class and get right into writing and conferencing. Writing time is the most valuable time.
- ★ Teach the students to run their own workshop, so you don't have to run it for them.
- ★ Keep a list from your reading program of things your students like, and then use that list as the basis for your mini-lessons.
- ★ Encourage shy kids to share by asking if you can share their writing for them.
- ★ Keep an in-class library of published student writing for students to read. This helps them get ideas and allows them to compare their work privately to the work of other students.
- ★ Have fun every day.

IT TAKES ABOUT A MONTH TO GET THINGS RUNNING WELL!

For more information, or for additional teaching materials, **please contact:** Teaching That Makes Sense, Inc. • **E-mail** stevepeha@aol.com • **Web** www.ttms.org

Management Strategies For Writer's Workshop

★ SO WHAT DO I DO WHEN?

If you talk to enough people or you read enough books, you'll probably bump into the idea that Writer's Workshop is a certain thing that has to be done a certain way. In my experience, that's not only not true, it's not valuable. Writer's Workshop is as dynamic and flexible as you choose to make it. And that's the main reason I like it: it gives teachers a variety of ways to manage their classroom within a basic structure that students can easily internalize and come to rely on.

The essence of workshop-style teaching—what makes it "workshop" as opposed to "traditional"—is not in what you teach, but how you teach it and how you relate to your students. If most of your class time is spent with kids writing on their own topics, if you participate as a fellow writer in the community, if everyone shares writing regularly, if you follow the kids and teach to their needs instead of to a pre-planned curriculum, then you've probably got a Writer's Workshop going.

In the four columns directly to the right, I've listed four "approaches" to getting started with Writer's Workshop. Remember: these are guidelines, not mandates.

★ TRADITIONAL ★

★ **Mini-Lesson**

★ **Status**

★ **Writing Time**

★ **Sharing**

This is the way most people start off because it is most similar to traditional teaching. This format gives the teacher the most control. I use it when I need to regain control of the class, set the stage for lesson content or a goal that I feel is particularly important, or start everyone off on a specific type of project. Some people use this format every day.

★ SHARE FIRST ★

★ **Sharing**

★ **Mini-Lesson**

★ **Status**

★ **Writing Time**

This is my favorite of the structured approaches to Writer's Workshop. The kids usually love starting out with sharing, and I get a chance to collect my thoughts about what I want to do. As kids share, I listen for specific things we could work on. When something comes up, I ask the kids if they'd like a lesson on it. That's how I choose my mini-lesson.

★ NO LESSON ★

★ **Status**

★ **Writing Time**

★ **Sharing**

This is a good approach when you're short on time or don't have a lesson you want to give. It's actually quite good to do this fairly regularly because it lets kids know that they have to get right down to business as soon as class starts. I find that I use this organization more frequently later in the year after everyone knows the class procedures and has heard most of my best mini-lessons—or when the kids just want to work.

★ DYNAMIC ★

★ **Give a MINI-LESSON when:** 1) There's something you think the class needs; 2) Students request help; 3) You detect via conferencing that 3 or 4 students have the same problem.

★ **Take STATUS OF THE CLASS when:** 1) You don't know where the kids are; 2) The kids don't know where they are; 3) You need to survey for an appropriate mini-lesson; 4) You need to survey for conferencing. 5) You think kids are slacking off.

★ **Go to WRITING TIME when:** 1) The kids want to work; 2) You want the kids to work; 3) You need to confer-ence; 4) You need a little peace and quiet.

★ **Go to SHARING when:** 1) Writer's need feedback; 2) You need to hear what the kids have done; 3) You want to check on the effectiveness of a mini-lesson; 4) You need to plan a mini-lesson.

Each of the four sections of the workshop can also be used simply to change the tempo of the class. I often switch from one to the other just to settle kids down if they're getting a little noisy.

This is my favorite way to do Writer's Workshop because it allows me the most flexibility and gives me the best opportunity to serve the needs of the students.

★ LOGISTICS

Organizing Student Writing in Grades K-2: The best approach I've seen has involved giving each student a wide-ruled spiral notebook for pre-writing and drafting plus a simple two-pocket folder. On one side of the folder, students keep writing ideas and teacher handouts. On the other side, they keep on-going work. The teacher keeps a third set of files—one for each student—to store published work.

Organizing Student Writing at Grades 3 and Above: Many teachers I work with are using a three-ring binder with divider sections named for each stage of the writing process. As students move a piece through the writing process, they store their work in the appropriate section of their binder.

Desk and Seating Arrangements: The best approaches are based on semi-circular arrangements where all students have an unobstructed view of the primary sharing and teaching positions. Please don't seat your students in rows and columns, it isn't good for anyone.

Scheduling: In the elementary grades, it's absolutely vital to have writer's workshop every day. For more advanced writers at the secondary level, three days a week is sufficient. The ideal amount of time to allot is an hour, but writer's workshop can be done well in as little as 40 minutes if both the students and the teacher are well organized and understand how the workshop is supposed to be run.

★ ADVICE ABOUT SHARING AND CONFERENCING

DON'T CORRECT...

★ **INSPECT the writing closely.** Read or listen thoughtfully and thoroughly.

★ **DETECT those parts that work and those that don't.** What do you like? What would help you enjoy the writing more?

★ **REFLECT on why some parts work and some parts don't.** Why do you like certain parts? How would improving other parts make the writing better? Use the language of the classroom criteria to explain how you feel.

★ **CONNECT your reactions to the author's intent.** What is the author's purpose? Why did the author choose to write this particular piece?

★ **INJECT your own opinions.** Be honest. Communicate using the language of the classroom criteria so that everyone can understand you. Remember: this is just your opinion; it's not the "truth".

★ **RESPECT the writer's reactions.** Listen closely to what the author has to say about your comments. Remember that he author does not have to make the changes you suggest.

★ **PERFECT the communication between audience and author.** Do you really understand each other? Make sure you're both using the language of the classroom criteria. Review the author's purpose and main idea.

★ **EXPECT to repeat the process...** as long as the author wants to continue or until the audience understands the what the author is trying to communicate.

For more information, or for additional teaching materials, **please contact:** Teaching That Makes Sense, Inc. • **E-mail** stevepeha@aol.com • **Web** www.ttms.org

The "Lesson Planning" Organizer

★ WHAT MAKES A GOOD LESSON?

It seems that new lessons are everywhere: in books, on the Internet, in workshops, and of course, in classrooms. But how can you tell a good lesson from a bad one? Here are things I think of whenever I run across new teaching ideas. Keeping these things in mind helps me stay focused on powerful, practical tools that I can feel confident about using in the classroom.

When I think about improving my teaching, I think about the things that really make a difference to me and to my students, the key elements that make my teaching most effective. Here are the things I think about when I plan and deliver lessons. Few lessons meet all of these criteria fully, but the most effective lessons usually have many of these attributes. I use this checklist as a guide to lesson planning and also as a tool for analyzing my teaching and making focused improvements.

A GOOD LESSON…

- ★ **Requires little or no preparation.** You don't have time to prep individual lessons. You also need to be able to deliver lessons "on the fly" as problems arise.
- ★ **Requires few if any materials.** Materials are expensive and they take time to acquire, organize, distribute, and collect. Also, lessons that require materials can't be used when materials are unavailable.
- ★ **Is tightly focused.** Few of us can handle more than one new thing at a time. Keeping lessons focused keeps them short so kids have more time to use what you've presented.
- ★ **Is easily customized for different learners.** Different learners have different needs. The best way to customize instruction is to provide instruction that's easily customized.
- ★ **Solves a real problem real people really have.** Ask the kids what problems they're having and then teach to those needs. You can do a lot to make sure you're solving real problems by making sure your kids are always doing real—that is, authentic—work.
- ★ **Can be taught at different developmental levels.** Any group of learners will represent a wide range of developmental abilities. In order to reach all learners, lessons have to be deliverable at different developmental levels.
- ★ **Provides something students can apply right away.** Get the teaching as close to the learning as possible. The more time that stands between a learner's exposure to something new and an opportunity to apply the knowledge gained, the less likely the learner is to be successful.
- ★ **Can be repeated often.** Few of us get things right the first time; re-teaching is a given. Lessons that are tied to specific content can often not be repeated. Focus on "process" lessons that can be applied to different content.
- ★ **Is delivered in response to student needs.** Give kids ownership of their own learning by insisting that they tell you when they need a lesson and what they need it on. When conferencing, guide your teaching with this question: "How can I best help this student to communicate his or ideas most effectively to an audience?"
- ★ **Is taught in the context of authentic student work.** When you teach in context and as problems arise, students already have a rationale for the information you're offering and a meaningful context in which to apply it.
- ★ **Involves teacher modeling.** Learners learn best by doing, but they learn second best from models. Don't forget to think out loud as you model in front of the group.
- ★ **Has well-defined content (the "What").** Make sure kids know what you're teaching them. Give your lesson a name, if possible.
- ★ **Has a well-defined rationale (the "Why").** Learners learn better when they know why they're learning something.
- ★ **Has a well-defined implementation (the "How").** Wrap up lessons with simple step-by-step procedures, criteria lists, guiding questions, and other helpful "tools" that learners can use to apply the knowledge you've given them on their own.

★ DESIGNING GOOD LESSONS

To me, designing a good lesson involves thinking about three components: the "What", the "Why", and the "How."

- ★ The **"What"** is the content of the lesson, the "thing" I want students to learn. Ideally, the "What" should come from the kids. In most cases, they know best what they need to learn. What happens if they don't know? I show them models of good work and ask them what they like about it. Chances are good that if they like something in someone else's work they'll want to be able to do it in their own. I believe that kids should be responsible for the "What" of their learning.
- ★ The **"Why"** is the rationale for learning and applying the new knowledge I am offering. The "Why" is not the reason I want the kids to learn the content, it's why **they** want to learn it—to solve a particular problem they're encountering in their work. The "Why" is at least as important as the "What" because without a clear understanding of why something needs to be done, learners may not be able to apply the learning in new situations. I try to develop the "Why" together with the kids, usually in a group discussion format. I believe that kids need to work with their teachers to discover the "Why" of their learning.
- ★ The **"How"** of a lesson is the most important piece, and it usually has to come from the teacher. After all, if students already knew how to do something, we wouldn't spend time teaching it. The "How" is a **strategy,** and it's almost always a step-by-step process of some sort. Strategies form the core of my direct teaching. Kids often need to be given the "How" of their learning, but when they feel safe to take risks, they can discover it on their own. In this case, I feel that my role is to help them articulate and codify their own strategies so they can be repeatedly applied and refined as needed.

★ DELIVERING GOOD LESSONS

In delivering a lesson, these are some of the things I think about:

- ★ **Rationale and content.** What is my rationale for giving the lesson? What is the lesson about? Does it have a title?
- ★ **Modeling and examples.** How will I model the lesson for the students? Do I have examples I can show them of what I'd like them to do? How will I help students analyze my models?
- ★ **Analytic vocabulary.** What specific terms or criteria can I introduce to help students talk about the lesson?
- ★ **Assessment.** Is there a self-assessment component students can use to analyze their progress? Is there something I can use to analyze their progress?
- ★ **Reinforcement.** How can I remind students during writing time to apply the lesson in their writing?
- ★ **Strategy.** Is there a step-by-step process students can follow to produce the desired result?
- ★ **Application.** How can I encourage students to apply the lesson right away during writing time? How can I apply the lesson myself as I model?
- ★ **Identify success and praise.** How can I identify those students who have applied the lesson correctly? How can I praise those students for their success in a way that benefits both them and their classmates?
- ★ **Identify failure and assist.** How can I identify those students who have not applied the lesson correctly? How can I assist those students in a way that benefits both them and their classmates?

★ A FEW THOUGHTS ON LESSONS

"In theory, mini-lessons are wonderful. The ritual of beginning every writing workshop with a whole-group gathering can bring form and unity to the workshop, and it's wonderful, when writers are deeply absorbed in their writing, to see the effect of a few carefully chosen tips from experts. Yet in practice I have found that mini-lessons often represent the worst part of a writing workshop. When I bring visitors in to observe writing workshops, I often deliberately time our visits so we avoid the mini-lesson."

Lucy Calkins, **The Art of Teaching Writing**, p. 198.

"None of the pioneers—researchers or teachers—who opened the doors to the teaching of writing provided us with prescriptive lessons. None of them has produced a book of mini-lessons. They know, because they truly understand the nature of the writing process, that such a book would become a formula written by an outsider unfamiliar with the diversity and uniqueness of the writers in a specific community."

Carol Avery, **…And with a Light Touch**, p. 139.

Initially I was very surprised to read these quotes. But after thinking about them for a while, and running into the same sentiments in many other books, I began to understand where these folks were coming from. I used to think lessons were the core of teaching. But the more I've worked in the classroom I've noticed that lessons end up being a relatively small part of what I do. Mostly I have kids work, and while they're working I help them, in short conferences, to solve the problems they encounter.

"Once, after I had observed Shelley Harwayne teaching a writing workshop, I commented to her that her mini-lesson had been fabulous. Apparently this comment perplexed her because as far as she knew, she hadn't given a mini-lesson that day. Then she realized that instead of what she perceived as a mini-lesson, she had begun the workshop with a quick tip. She had said to the children, "When you open your folders today, and every day, would you reread what you have written? Before you add to it, have a little conference with yourself. Ask yourself how you feel about the piece, whether there are ways you could make it better." To my way of thinking, this was a perfect mini-lesson."

Lucy Calkins, **The Art of Teaching Writing**, p. 198.

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Let's work together to make your teaching the best it can be.

Please contact me any time!

Even the best workshops and teaching materials can't meet the needs of every teacher all the time. That's why we need to stay in touch. Send me an e-mail any time you have a question. I'll do my best to get back to you quickly with answers, additional teaching materials, or other resources.

Please send suggestions, questions, and corrections to:
stevepeha@ttms.org

TEACHING THAT MAKES SENSE

Learning Patterns

Teach Smarter Not Harder

Imagine a structure 13 years tall, 180 days wide, and five subjects deep. This is a K-12 education. Each cell in this structure represents a single class period in a single subject for a total of 11,700 educational opportunities.

By using *Teaching That Makes Sense® Learning Patterns™* we can reduce this academic load for students, simplify planning and instruction for teachers, and help more kids learn more things in less time and with less teacher effort.

Learning Patterns are cross-curricular tools optimized for successful teaching in any subject or grade. They are designed to be used, re-used, and shared across classrooms without requiring extensive training or preparation.

By analyzing standards documents and the methods of effective teachers, *Teaching That Makes Sense* has identified underlying commonalities in learning targets across the curriculum. These commonalities represent dozens of potential assignments that can be taught and learned through a small set of foundational skills.

Consider exposition. Students consume and create expository information in many ways: they read expository texts, write expository essays, create reports, answer test questions, etc. As varied as expository expression is, it has a simple underlying structure that can be explained by a single *Learning Pattern*.

Some *Learning Patterns* cover skills like narration, exposition, and persuasion. Others help teachers and students with things like assessment, reading comprehension, and memorization. The same patterns can be used across grade levels and subject areas as well, so kids take their learning with them as they grow.

For more information about Learning Patterns click here.

"Learning begins with teaching that makes sense."

TEACHING THAT MAKES SENSE

Agile Transformation

Building Collective Capacity for School-Wide Change

We are discovering better ways of improving schools by doing it and by helping others do it. Through this work, we have come to value:

- **People.** *Individuals and interactions* over policy and politics;
- **Achievement.** *Maximum potential* over minimum competence;
- **Courage.** *Fierce collaboration* over comfortable compromise;
- **Agility.** *Responding to change* over following a plan.

The items on the right are important, but we value the items on the left more.

Agile Transformation is grounded in two principles: **(1)** People are more successful when they enjoy their work; and **(2)** Schools are more successful when they support people in developing the autonomy, competence, and relatedness that makes their work more enjoyable. Features of *Agile Transformation* include:

- **Paired Practice.** Nobody works alone. Everyone has a team and a teammate.
- **Rapid Iteration.** Sprint through big problems one small problem at a time.
- **Making Sense.** What do we do? Why do we do it? How do we know it works?
- **"Stand Up" Sessions.** What did you do yesterday? What are you doing today? What do you need to be successful? Agile leaders remove impediments.
- **Successful Failure.** Fail fast, fail smart. No blame games. Apply what you learn as you move closer to your goal with each iteration.
- **Souls and Roles.** Aligning what we do with who we are.
- **"Just in Time" Solutions.** Handle problems as they arise. Respond as needed.

"Learning begins with teaching that makes sense."

TEACHING THAT MAKES SENSE

Essential Elements of Agile Schools

The Qualities of Effective Educational Communities

1. **Agile schools work because people choose to make them work.** We believe in freedom of choice, and that making the choice to participate fully in teaching, learning, and leading is the most important choice we can make.
2. **Agile schools love to learn.** We believe that learning is inherently enjoyable and that giving learners a responsible degree of autonomy in their individual pursuit of knowledge and skill makes it even more so. Agile educators are learners, too.
3. **Agile schools take a constructive approach to failure.** We believe failure is a normal part of success. Kids struggle to learn. Teachers struggle to teach. Administrators struggle to lead. We all experience failure on the way to solving new problems. The faster we fail, the more solutions we try. The smarter we fail, the more knowledge we bring to the next iteration. Instead of looking back at problems, Agile schools look forward to solving them.
4. **Agile schools are always getting better.** We believe there's almost always a better way of doing something, and that it's almost always worthwhile trying to figure out what that better way is. Agile schools value progress, and the appropriate measurement thereof, because progress is the true indicator of learning.
5. **Agile schools empower people to empower others.** We believe that individuals—not systems or policies—are the true sources of power in our schools. Our responsibility is to use our power in service of the greater good, and to teach students how to use their power that way, too.
6. **Agile schools achieve extraordinary results.** We believe in transformative learning that goes far beyond incremental improvements in test scores. Adults in Agile schools also strive for extraordinary achievement in their profession as well.

"Learning begins with teaching that makes sense."

TEACHING THAT MAKES SENSE

Essential Elements

continued...

7. **Agile schools are based on deeply-held beliefs, clearly-articulated values, and a firmly-rooted sense of commitment.** We believe that the most successful schools are those run by people who know what matters most to them and who possess an unshakable determination to get it.

8. **Agile schools are communities where people make a difference and connect with something greater than themselves.** We believe that the drive to contribute is part of human nature. Our role is to guide people in directing their contribution toward its highest and best use.

9. **Agile schools value ownership, positive attitudes, high expectations, and unwavering optimism.** We believe that making a good life is about making good choices, that the pursuit of happiness is an inalienable right, and that self-mastery is the key to its rightful exercise.

10. **Agile schools embrace the risk inherent in the achievement of great things.** We educate for maximum potential not minimum competence. We believe that all learners have within them extraordinary strengths and untapped resources, and that learning is only limited by our willingness to attempt what has never before been attempted. We welcome change, we innovate, and we seek out challenges that organize and measure the best of our energies and skills.

11. **Agile schools affirm self-knowledge as the most valuable knowledge and self-determination as the most basic right.** We believe that introspection, self-disclosure, and intellectual honesty are essential to personal transformation. We seek to support young people in becoming the adults they want to be.

12. **Agile schools are communities where no one is above the rules, everyone has a voice, freedom is sacred, equity and excellence are not mutually exclusive, and the highest goal of education is contributing to the present and future well-being of individuals who can thrive independently in a modern democracy.** Agile schools value college preparation, career fulfillment, and engaged citizenship, but we value something else even more. Collegiate, career, and civic achievement are important, but they are means to ends, not ends in themselves. Human happiness, meaningful contribution, and sustained well-being of self and community are the ultimate ends to which Agile schools aspire on behalf of the children and families we serve.

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TEACHING THAT MAKES SENSE

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