Language Arts Journal of Michigan

Volume 10
Issue 1 *Focus: Tough Questions. Hard Choices.*

Article 11

1994

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I'm lucky really. I came to teaching English somewhat later in my career as an educator, and at the time, I didn't even have certification. I started my professional life as a school counselor, until the summer 11 years ago when I was informed that I'd be teaching English at C. W. Otto Middle School in Lansing. I tried to tell the powers-that-be that my certification was in social studies, and I was none too competent in that, but they were into filling classroom slots with bodies. Did I want a job? Well, yes.

I fell back on several positives, my own innate love for literature and the written word, and a strong high school education in English that did more than rely on diagramming and vocabulary skills. I quickly realized two things that first year I taught English: I loved it; and I needed more strategies, better strategies. And by this time a revolution in English Education had begun. I had more ammunition than I could ever fully actualize. This is one of the basic truths about teaching that now keeps me in the classroom each year in spite of repeated attempts to lure me back into a counselor's office: to be a language arts teacher in today's classroom offers a wide-open chance to be creative and innovative.

That first summer, with a year of real teaching behind me, I enrolled in an English teachers' workshop at Michigan State University, and there, with professorial models actually practicing the skills they preached, I began the explorations that led me to the workshop structure I now use to teach everything. My classroom became a laboratory for each new idea I learned about as I took subsequent courses in English Education and attended every conference I could get to. As I read and research, I see how the Nancie Atwells and Linda Reifs of the world evolve.

It was Nancie Atwell's book, *In the Middle*, that set me firmly on the path to the format I use today. I was already well-versed in the process writing approach, the literature-based reading approach, the integrated language arts approach, the reading and writing across the curriculum approach, and so on. Even so, Atwell's descriptions of her classroom, as her students delved into books and let loose with their writing, were riveting. I was hungry to have my students devour books, as hers did, and write about them with such intelligence and grace. I was eager to see my students discover the power of their own words as their writing took on voice and allowed them to discover the full spectrum of their creative abilities.

I resolved then and there, even before I finished the book, to try her approach with my classes. I wanted my students to select topics of study that fit their own interests as well as exposing them to new ideas; I wanted my role to be that of facilitator or guide, rather than that of lecturer or test-giver. I wanted the kids to have useful chunks of time in which to develop ideas

and creativity, rather than pass the already chopped-up class periods with more chopped-up skill drills and demon ditto-masters. I wanted there to be continuity from day to day and from my class to their other classes. I wanted kids to make connections among ideas and with their daily lives outside the classroom. I wanted my students to recognize and value their own accomplishments.

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It was, of course, harder to accomplish than the book made it appear. Atwell has her style; I have mine. Atwell had one kind of schedule (an enlightened one, I noticed); I had to operate under a more traditional and choppy scheduling umbrella. Atwell had a particular blending of cultures and socio-economic mix among her Booth Bay community; I had my particular combination of multi-cultural and socio-economic diversity within an urban, inner-city setting in Lansing. What we shared in common, however, was a determination to take whatever group of kids we were given and move them from wherever they started to as far as they could possibly stretch as learners and users of language. In many classrooms, the goal is still to get through the textbook or pass the test. I joined Atwell in her quest to use the many resources our wide world has to offer as a text and to use the real outcomes of student thinking as their exam, thinking that is reflected in thoughtful writing, often for publication to a wider audience, and thinking that shows up in the creative projects and presentations that students pour their hearts into.

I had read about the work of Donald Graves, Lucy Calkins, Tom Romano, and others, and had started with the usual writing workshop approach. Atwell's book gave me an even more specific format to follow and provided problem-solving clues to use with my own 8th graders. I added a reading workshop to my crowded agenda. Each year, I continue to revise and re-shape the way the workshop operates in my classroom. Last year, I hit upon a combination of structures that all but ended management hassles and left me delighted with the obvious and measurable progress my students were making. So this year I have added genre and thematic workshops to the more usual reading and writing workshops of former years. Although there is a basic structure and format to my classes, the content changes, the pacing changes, and the skill levels change as the year progresses. I am sure this, too, is but a work-in-progress, and I am curious to see in what ways the structure will evolve, ways that I haven't even begun to visualize yet.

The workshop shell is the same no matter what the topic or focus of the particular workshop might be. The shell encompasses four important components: silent time, choice time, publishing, and reflection. Almost every day in the workshop follows a routine that begins with a period of silent, intense, concentration time to read, write, or listen, depending on the focus of the workshop. Students are accountable for how they use their time and fill out daily logs that chart activities and progress. At any time, I can say to a student, "Show me what you accomplished today," or I can check their folders to see what is done, what is in progress, what has been abandoned. The responsibility is fully on the student to demonstrate progress, and in the act of doing so, students are self-assessing.

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The remainder of each class period is given to choice time. I provide a variety of activities that are geared toward the development of skills that can be evaluated as outcomes. Each activity carries an amount of points that it is worth toward the final grade. Students are free to pick and

choose, mix and match activities to get the blend of points they need to earn and the blend of skills they need to learn. Right now, in our Medieval Workshop, some students are taking on the role of a person in the middle ages and are creating a diary for that person, based on research about what life was like in that era. They will age their papers and borrow a calligraphy pen to write words or letters in Old English style, and they will design their own illuminated letters and borders. Other students are creating an ABC of Knighthood, precisely choosing words that describe the qualities of a perfect knight and explaining why the word choices are appropriate. These students now fully understand what adjectives are and how they are different from nouns and verbs and adverbs. Still others are writing responsively about the book we are commonly reading, a vivid story about a girl who disguises herself as a boy in order to attend a school for aspiring knights. They may explore the gender stereotypes of yesteryear and compare them to today, or they may be developing a list of song titles that accurately reflect the events in the book.

While each workshop has a particular focus, learning choices draw upon an integration of language arts skills. So in a Speaker's Workshop, I may highlight an awareness and acquisition of the skills necessary for public speaking, but students will also find themselves reading and writing and listening. Preparing an autobiographical monolog or a puppet show requires writing and editing before it reaches the spoken stage. I require every student to listen to themselves on a tape recorder during their rehearsals before they can present to their audience. No language arts skill stands alone.

Each workshop also lends itself rather tidily to interdisciplinary topics. Our medieval workshop is conducted at the same time that students are studying this time period in their history classes, and the science teacher has them looking at the burst of scientific discoveries that occurred at that time. Interested students can then use that information in their research diaries or in their Medieval Times newspaper that some choose to create.

One of the activity choices is always reflective writing in learning logs. The topics offered for reflection provide another method for students to evaluate and reflect on their own learning style and progress. I see a lot of self-fulfilling prophecy occurring among many students. As they reflect on the strengths and weaknesses that they perceive in their work, they self-correct many of the weaknesses. Often students inflate their strengths at first; but by doing so, they have indirectly set some goals. It isn't long before I see direct, measurable progress applied in their work:

Josh states in his journal that ,"*it has helped me use exciting words that would make people keep reading....*" In response to the question, "*What have you learned about yourself through your writing?* " Josh reflects that "*I learned that I love football and would give almost anything to make it in that business...I realize that I love it because every time I tried to think of something, football came into my mind. I'm writing a short story about a boy who loved football and a poem about a football field and a letter to a football superstar.*"

In response to the reflection question, "What area of writing do you see improvement in?" Nancy offers, "*...I think I am more creative in what I write about... My paragraphs have more meaning, they make more sense. They are not skimpy and short anymore.*" Nancy is right; her words flow out of her, and her writing has taken on a mature quality.

Publishing is the core outcome of every workshop and takes many forms. Aside from the obvious context of making a piece of writing presentable to a wider audience, publishing includes any way of taking knowledge or ideas and creating a method to communicate that knowledge and those ideas. Thus, in a Reading Workshop, it is publishing when a book review is presented during the morning P.A. announcements. In the Speaker's Workshop, it is publishing to tell a joke to the class or to present a puppet show. In the Medieval Workshop, it is publishing to stage a Medieval Faire or to take part in a tournament. Pieces of writing can be published by creating a book, a mobile, or a three-dimensional object that displays the writing. One

thoughtful student wrote a poignant piece about a classmate who had been killed in one of those senseless acts of violence peppering the newspapers. He fashioned a small coffin out of wood, rolled the writing into a beribboned scroll, and laid it in the coffin as if it were a body, placing a dried flower on top. Everyone wanted to read his piece of writing!

Throughout the school year, students will participate in workshops for readers, for writers, and for speakers. They will also experience a thematic workshop; my favorite is one on Medieval times. We started out the year this time with a Poetry Workshop. Each workshop day begins in the same way; there is a concentrated silent time for 20 minutes, while students read, write, or listen.

The classroom library is stocked with books I've gotten at used bookstores, garage sales, and from book clubs like Tab and Troll, to supplement the budget my department allows me for books. I might have the kids listen to a video selection, a radio script, a recorded poetry reading, or even each other during the concentrated time of a Speaker's workshop. There is no time to waste; with only 50 minute periods, each minute counts. The kids learn quickly to be ready with their books or paper as soon as the bell rings. I start this routine from the first day of school and make it clear that my expectation is to see them in their seats with their materials, already concentrating on whatever the current silent time task is. Part of their total grade is based on a daily on-task grade. They lose points from this daily grade if I have to spend time settling them down. I'm very consistent about this, and I demonstrate to them in short grade conferences how their daily grade impacts the total positively or negatively. In less than a minute, almost everyone is settled down and on-task. I quickly dispose of attendance chores, and then I join the students in reading, or writing, or listening.

During the transition to 25 minutes of choice time, students often volunteer to share something they've written, and if I have any directions, or a mini-lesson prepared, this is when I would do it. A mini-lesson might be a demonstration of note-taking, or it might be a short presentation on illuminated letters, or it might be presenting an example of student work that exemplifies the desirable outcomes.

Choice time is when the teacher functions in a strong facilitative role. This is a time when the teacher holds short conferences or roams the room looking for samples of exemplary work to point out and use for models; the teacher helps students monitor their own success at completion of activities or redirects energy into revising a product to meet the stated criteria more successfully. While the goal is to create independent learners and each activity choice is structured to encourage students to follow directions without needing a lot of teacher explanation, we all know that many students need a nudge now and again:

> *Chris, have you checked the Thesaurus to find some synonyms for these words? Here, let me show you how to use one....April, I know it's hard, but if you just take one part at a time, it all gets done. Start with just one book, and write down the things they ate in Medieval times that are different from what we eat. That will give you some good material for your diary entries later...What is it that makes a poem look different from other kinds of writing, Sarah? Look at these poems, do you see how some lines are short and some are long? You don't have to write to the end of the line, like we do for paragraphs. Try playing with this and experimenting with where to stop each line...*

As kids hear me say these things to one student, the message is being received by many. Incidental learning is highly underrated in a classroom!

This is a big change in routine for most students and for their parents, as well. From the very beginning of the school year, I expect my students to make choices and be accountable for those choices. There are very clear outcomes set forth for the students; for some it takes time to learn that the process will lead directly to the product. I find that the first report card marking sees a shift in the usual grade spread that I have encountered in the past. The typical configuration used to be a sprinkling of A's and B's and a bulge of C's and D's, with the failing grade pretty much reserved for the contingent of students who simply don't attend with anything resembling

regularity, or who have mastered the art of doing absolutely nothing when they do attend. Now I get almost no middle ground. There are a large number of A/B students and an almost equal amount of failing students. As students realize that they truly must make reasonable choices and that they are accountable for how they use choice time, they take steps to become more productive, and I have learned to trust that by the end of the semester, students will be back on a good grade track.

Regardless of the grade they earn, most students are positive about the workshop approach. I see this reflected frequently in comments made in their reflection writing and in spontaneous comments that pop out in the classroom. They range from the very positively direct ones like "I never knew I could write so well," or "I don't want to clean up yet; this is fun!," to the more left-handed compliment of "This isn't as bad as I thought it would be!" While I still get the occasional muttered incantation of "this is dumb!" I hear that with surprising infrequency now. And the mutterer often ends up being an enthusiastic participant before the year is through. Choice time allows for a great deal of interaction and natural cooperative groupwork. There is a friendly camaraderie and tone in the room. Most kids want to be a part of that. When I tell the students that they can learn calligraphy techniques to make their medieval work look more authentic, I get a lot of ho-hum looks. But put a calligraphy pen in the hands of one student and suddenly a whole bunch of kids are gathered round to see magic in the making. I have the pens and sample sheets ready; I'm about to hear...*Can I do that too?*

I have never had an abundance of parents take the initiative to question my teaching practices. But for those who do, I find the most effective approach is to get them into the room to observe a workshop in action. Parents are invariably impressed with the obvious concentration that occurs during the silent time at the beginning. After the horror stories in our daily newspapers about the violence and chaos that reign in public schools today, parents are pleased to see their children productively engaged in reading or writing or listening attentively.

During choice time, the room is a beehive of activities, and the walls are covered with end products that are tangible and visible and impressive. Mobiles hang down from the light fixtures and literally hit us in the heads with writing samples. Several bookstands are filled with student-produced books and magazines. I can demonstrate to parents how grammar skills are actually integrated into a private conference or peer group, and parents can see the progression from the rough draft stage to the final product. I also invite parents to attend special presentations; while few take me up on it, those that do tend to be reassured that quality learning is occurring. The best attended function is the Medieval Faire, which is an outcome of the Medieval Workshop. Some parents have been enthusiastic enough to join in the spirit and come in costume.

I've accepted fully the premise that to be effective at any skill, it takes practice over an extended period of time. To be better at language communication skills, students need to spend time actively engaged in authentic acts of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. This workshop format has proven to be exactly the best place to pack in these experiences. Give us books. Give us writing materials. Give us time. These students will become learners and thinkers.

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