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## **LEARNING TO PLAY WITH THE CARDS I WAS DEALT**

**Marybeth Tessmer**

"We just aren't getting the money to operate the programs, and you're lowest in English Department seniority. Our loss is your new principal's gain." Devastated! Insulted! That's how I felt when my principal told me that I was reassigned to a seventh grade classroom in another building. For seven years I had been very contentedly teaching expository, creative, and developmental writing to high school students. I had no foreshadowing of the personal growth that I'd experience in my new assignment. Instead, I feared teaching students who came to school with lunch pails, regarded recess as the highlight of the day, and called an English class "language."

My school district is characterized as low-income; all the buildings are original ones built back in the 1950's. There is no money for a separate middle school building, and the seventh grade is part of the elementary school, the classic self-contained classroom. I was used to 55 minute class sessions with new students each period and a variety of English classes. Nowhere in my education was I prepared to teach an elementary curriculum. Seventh grade in my district, however, retained all the subject grades 4-6 studied: spelling, reading, social studies, math, science, etc. Very quickly I realized that my assignment included five preparations a day for courses which were not part of my college training ("Michigan History," for example), a classroom where the students remained all day, and numerous duties I had never performed before, such as collecting lunch money, providing extra recess, planning holiday classroom parties, keeping students from using the in-class drinking fountain anytime they wished, etc. I was angry, bitter, and scared.

The fall arrived and so did my first day. Students bounced in noisily and filled every single desk in the room. Several mainstreamed special

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education students also appeared throughout the day for English, reading, and Michigan History classes taught in my "regular" classroom. No one even took the time to tell me about mainstreaming. My student count swelled to 38. Bells had once guided me through English classes; schedules had once dictated what class was taught at what time. Now I had no idea of how to determine class length, what to teach, or when to teach it. And what did I do when part of my class left for music or gym or band, and the rest stayed behind? My usually organized class became chaos, leaving me feeling stupid and out of place. The entire first morning was spent working on verb usage because I was too terrified to teach any other subject. But after floundering for three days, I finally selected English as a subject important enough to be taught in the morning session.

I had emphasized the writing process in my high school English classes, so carryover was easy. Since seventh graders are generally responsive, my students soon understood that each writing involved rough, second, third, and final drafts. Many chances for revision were offered. At that early point in my new career, though, I was a slave driver. No consideration was given for either the student who finished ahead of the deadline or the one who just couldn't meet timelines. I assigned and they wrote, in every subject, but something was wrong. My paper load was enormous! All the drafts came in at the same time, on the same subject, in the same genre. I was required to document two grades per subject, per week. My weekends and evenings were spent editing and grading. I was a staunch believer in writing-across-the-curriculum, but not ready to be a martyr for it. The conditions were ripe for my personal revolution.

At a workshop I had attended the preceding summer, I was introduced to Nancie Atwell's book *In the Middle*. During the second semester of the school year, I read the section on organizing the classroom into a writer's workshop. Atwell's step-by-step process provided me with everything I needed. I sent the following letter home to parents telling them about the Writer's Workshop.

Dear Parents of my Seventh Graders,

Hello! I'm Mrs. Tessmer, your child's teacher this year. I demand a great deal from my students because that's what I'm here for: to teach. My main interests are writing/composition and reading. I've taught writing and reading courses in the high school and at the college level for Delta College, Great Lakes Junior College, and

Saginaw Valley State University. You can see that my English teaching experiences cover a wide variety of ages!

Plan to see a MAJOR emphasis on writing, even in Social Studies. I'm certain you'll be pleased with your child's improvement. Writing is a skill, but it should also be a pleasure. This year I will be facilitating a WRITER'S WORKSHOP. Each writer will be handled independently, based upon writing problems, and the writer will set a personal completion date. Real writers follow different timetables; so does your writer. Four completed writing process pieces are required in each marking period to qualify for a C. PLEASE ASK TO SEE SOME OF YOUR STUDENT'S WRITINGS. I'm excited about this workshop!

I look forward to a great school year! (Expect to see some super results with our classroom computer. We'll be word processing using Appleworks.) Your son or daughter will work hard this year; SO WILL I!!!! I can't wait to watch them learn and to learn from them!

Mrs. Tessmer

This message sent, I was excited and ready.

To introduce the workshop, we spent the first week going through the process together. I had all my students work with the same genre (an experience narrative) and the same deadlines for each stage. As each step was completed, I used wide-tip felt markers and added the indicated progress to a large piece of poster paper I taped to the wall. Each phase was printed in a different color. This made it easier for me to explain the various processes involved in each writing: prewriting, rough drafting, reading to a small group which provides feedback, revising in red ink, writing a double-spaced second draft, peer editing with answers to response questions; more revising using a red pen, writing a third draft to be submitted for my editing, revising with red pen, drafting a final copy and submitting it to me with all preceding drafts attached. I wanted to trace a writer's path and progress through a developing piece. This gave us a sense of continuity in the development of a piece. The poster became a visual for the workshop writing format and a point of reference. The students knew what they had to do in order for me to approve a piece of writing. But after three weeks, I took the poster down because I wanted the process to become a natural part of workshop. By then the writers understood the process and/or copied it down for themselves. It also helped to establish useful writer's jargon -- "rough draft," "revising," "editing," etc.

They weren't the only ones who wrote. I brought in one of my own writings as part of a demonstration of peer editing and group sharing. The students needed to see that I also struggled with drafts and sought revision from other writers. Wasn't I a writer too? I published my final draft, shared it with the class, and told them theirs would also be published.

When we finished the first paper, our orientation was completed. It was time to break out of our lockstep pace and start a true Writer's Workshop. I began this process by explaining the freedom of Writer's Workshop and how their writings would be different from the paper they had just finished. They would now select their own subjects, genres, timelines, etc. (I did post a copy of suggested genres on a bulletin board and added other possibilities, such as raps, etc., when they emerged in workshop.) They couldn't believe that they would be allowed to walk around the classroom, actually select their own subjects, and establish personal timelines – even though they would have to keep a final deadline in view (one week before the end of the period). The seventh graders were enthusiastic and anxious to begin. Truthfully, I felt some apprehension because my only experience was in sedate high school English classes where the students sat in orderly rows according to a seating chart. Would Writer's Workshop encourage chaos among my young students who others referred to as "hormones on feet"? Could walking hormones find their own direction?

My former principal referred to noise in two ways: noise and constructive noise; Writer's Workshop became the latter. The environment gave me time to work with students. And there was time when I could work on my own writing. I rarely had any discipline problems, but my students did know that if the volume rose too high, they heard only one warning from me. The second alarm meant they had to work alone the rest of workshop time that day. Some days they did work alone, but, generally, they patrolled their own troops and kept them reasonably quiet. They valued the collaborative feature of workshop. As the weeks passed, I felt as much enthusiasm for Writer's Workshop as my students did. The writers bore more responsibility; I became a facilitator. Students from all learning levels— including special education— were enjoying writing. Lisa, a student who refused to write in the special education classroom, wrote an autobiographical account of a runaway teen. Eventually she became so comfortable in workshop that she shared it with us, confiding that it was the first time she'd ever told, much less written, about her experience. Like Lisa, students found others to listen

to their drafts, edit papers, help them revise, and occasionally read to the entire class during the last 10 minutes for "class share." One student per day volunteered or was asked to share the piece he or she was writing with the rest of us. We provided feedback for what we liked and what we wanted to know more about.

My seventh graders discovered their own subjects and genres, from sensitive poetry of love for animals and early romance to the macabre sequels of the infamous Elm Street Freddie Kreuger. And, because they felt comfortable with workshop and the writer's jargon, they were soon requesting permission for collaborative writing, a new experience for me. Kevin, Jeff, and Tom wrote a humorous tale about Freddie Kreuger as a senior citizen, wearing Lee Press-on Nails and terrorizing defenseless people from his wheelchair! Some teachers might be concerned about such subject matter. But up until then my students had always been told what to write and how long it had to be, and they came to me detesting writing and feeling very inadequate and uncomfortable. Letting them write about something important to them made writing not only a skill, but a pleasure. These students felt deep ownership for their compositions.

The kids learned from each other; trust was a working feature. No matter what they did, students were involved in each other's work and workshop always ended too soon. If there was any other time free during the day, they'd request workshop!

Workshop taught me that kids are creative, can enjoy writing, will regulate their time within deadlines, and, given the chance in a risk-free climate, can produce volumes. My role was to encourage their efforts and edit third drafts—a task involving minimal work. Papers did not all come in at the same time, so seldom did I have huge piles of paperwork to deal with. I no longer edited for every error, but carefully identified two or three problems for a particular student to revise. My goal was to create independent writers who gradually were weaned from me as they became an independent class of writers, peer-editors, and self-editors. Writing Workshop offered them this challenge. I was reacting to content, rather than mechanics, applying all I had learned in Donald Murray's essay collection, *Learning by Teaching*. Frequent student contact made it easier to recall a writer's problems and notice improvements, but I also wanted to document my comments. I used a three-ring notebook and filled it with a page for each student with the following information: student's name, current marking

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period, the date I edited the writing, its title, the writer's strengths in the paper, and my suggestions. If a parent came in for a conference, I had an immediate file to retrieve. It gave substance to the program and reflected the individualized approach of my writing instruction.

I published their drafts frequently, thus establishing audiences other than myself. My students became published authors, although their recognition was confined to our building. Believing that parents need to stay informed, I frequently encouraged them to see what their children could produce, thus bridging the gap between home and school.

My paper load came in regularly, but not from every student every night. English lesson plans were virtually eliminated. And I was enjoying my facilitator role. But the real thrill was watching the students assist each other and enjoy it! Head to head, knee to knee, bottoms up, on the floor, in the corners of the room—students were talking about their writings. We resorted to a signup list for those who sought the privacy of the editing corner, a private, rug-lined area. Every student, even the ones never accepted in other social situations, felt an integral part of Writer's Workshop. Even "Ruben the Radical" gained recognition as a poet and became a mentor for other first-time poets. The mainstreamed special education students mixed freely with other students. Jeremy, 15 and in the seventh grade for the second time, spent hours writing raps and helping others struggling with the difficult rap rhythms. He gained needed acclaim and read his work to us at various stages. Everyone had something to write about, yet used different styles, genres, work habits, and speed. Workshop offered them flexibility and challenge. Some students even worked simultaneously on several pieces: greeting cards, wills, poems, etc. They valued what we called "cooldown time," letting writings rest awhile. Most importantly, our workshop offered one role for all: writer.

The highlight of the school year was the Composition Country Fair. Each student selected a favorite piece and displayed it on tables set up in the school gym. The kids brought in props or some illustration to draw attention to the selection. I remember the collaborative writing based on the Freddie Kreuger movies. The group brought in a model of an arm, drizzled red food coloring all over it, and set it on the table near their story, an immediate hit, daring to be read! A poem about a sunny summer day at the beach was displayed in a small box of Lake Huron sand and pieces of driftwood. A supernatural story of a nightly ghost hung from the top floor

of a miniature, cardboard, haunted house. The short story about a car race became part of a model car display, a personal collection.

We invited students from our elementary building and the high school next door. A stack of blank, square papers was placed beside each writing exhibit. Readers were invited to respond. Writer's Workshop encouraged shared writings and the Country Fair offered us the ultimate experience: a real audience from outside our classroom. Every student received feedback.

My situation has been difficult. Many of my colleagues have not experienced such transitions, and sometimes I envy their stability. Yet, if I had not been reassigned to the elementary school, I would never have attempted a workshop approach. I have made many adjustments, forcing myself to remain flexible, but I have discovered that education, students, and I are not static. I face a new stack of writings each fall. As I meet the challenge, I know now that the most important things I can do as an educator and the most rewarding things I can do as a person are to continue to encourage self-respect, classroom interaction, sincere communication, and a love for self-expression.

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