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Using the Writer's Notebook: Engaging All Writers and Meeting Their Needs

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"Lunchtime treats...or traits? What are we going to do about the writing?"

"No way, I ain't writing!" These were the first words I heard from one of my fourth-grade, reluctant writing students during the first week of school, as we began one of our first writing assignments. Noticing the angry look in his eyes and the crossed arms, I knew I was going to have to come up with some unique ideas to motivate this child. He insisted that he had no stories that were worth telling, but I knew better. I had heard many "stories" from his previous teachers, and I could just tell by the look in his eyes that he was dying to get those stories out, even if he didn't realize it yet himself. Even though many of the students I worked with that year were very capable writers, this one student's attitude bothered me the most. I wondered, "How come this boy doesn't think he has any stories to tell, and how can I get him to understand that he does have stories worth telling and recording?" And so began the next leg of the writing teacher journey.

Aaah....The "Fourth Grade Slump." Since we were fourth grade teachers, my colleagues and I had heard that phrase tossed around, and realized that yes, it was a real phenomenon. The demands of teaching writing while meeting high-stakes testing requirements can be overwhelming for students and teachers. Motivating students to meet all of these requirements was an even bigger challenge. Motivating our students to write for the sheer joy of writing was the biggest challenge of all.

"Lunchtime Talks" **about the Writing Process**

For several years, my colleagues and I had studied and implemented the works of who we felt were the "experts" of language arts instruction: Fountas and Pinnell. We successfully implemented the reading workshop model into our reading program. Our students were internalizing comprehension strategies, self-selecting novels, responding thoughtfully to literature, conferencing with us about their reading, and voluntarily writing and presenting "book talks."

Our reading test results soared; our writing test scores did not. We pondered over the many reasons why this could be so. We faced similar issues to other schools: overcrowded classrooms, student diversity, and dealing with mostly at-risk students. But we knew that we still had a motivation issue; therefore, a group of upper elementary teachers and I started pondering the issues in teaching writing. The question my grade three-five colleagues and I asked ourselves over and over again was: "How do we engage students in writing, and maintain their interest?" And so began the "lunchtime talks" every Thursday about the writing process.

After much research and discussion, we started with a book study of Ruth Culham's *Six + 1 Traits of Writing*. We chose this book for several reasons. For one thing, Culham's theories were grounded in classroom teacher research. Also, the traits emphasized what good writers "naturally" do. Finally, the traits of good writing made a lot of sense, and we re-discovered a basic tenet of teaching: the more you teach something, the more you learn from it. This proved to be the case as we started on the journey of teaching with the traits. Each week at our writing group meetings, we would discuss a chapter or two, implement the writing strategies in our classrooms and share what was working and what needed tweaking.

We also ran a monthly study group based on the work of Regie Routman's *Writing Essentials*, through her Routman-in-Residence Program, which was very practical for our needs. As a reading specialist in a suburb with students very similar to ours, Routman provided the perfect model for us to further our study

into better writing instruction. While we felt that this was all very beneficial to our teaching, some of us wanted to explore the “motivation” component to writing more deeply. We had also read Keane and Zimmerman’s *Mosaic of Thought*, so we knew that kids needed time, choice and talk to become lifelong readers. We concluded from our book studies and classroom anecdotes that students needed the same thing in order to become lifelong writers: *time, choice, and talk*.

Real Writers – Real Tools: Writer’s Notebook

We acknowledged the fact that not all of our students were going to be authors one day. But we also knew that learning how to communicate effectively through writing was an important lifelong skill that they would use no matter which profession they chose later on in life. Instilling a desire to write into our students definitely couldn’t hurt. After reading and studying the works of Ralph Fletcher and Aimee Buckner, we decided to incorporate the writer’s notebook into our writing program. In using these two teacher/researcher/authors as resources, we had two perspectives that framed our teaching. The first perspective was from that of an actual author who used a writer’s notebook: Ralph Fletcher’s *A Writer’s Notebook: Unlocking the Writer Within You*. The second perspective came from a fourth grade teacher/researcher: Aimee Buckner’s *Notebook Know-How: Strategies for the Writer’s Notebook*.

Golden Threads and Sapphires

Ruth Culham refers to voice as finding that “golden thread,” and gathering ideas as “digging for sapphires.” We knew that we needed to guide our students towards coming up with and developing their own ideas and style, or showing their “soul” in their writing. We believed students’ roughest writing obstacles tended to occur just from when they were trying to get started, and the writer’s notebook seemed to honor all of these processes. Not every prewriting exercise or draft had to be published; this was the student’s decision, with guidance and conferencing. The notebook also lent itself naturally to differentiation.

By the time students entered fourth grade, the range of abilities was pretty wide. The notebook allowed students to feel comfortable taking writing risks at their

own level. It also supported all of the traits of writing and helped students to build their fluency. For example, when we worked on a prewriting strategy such as listing, beginning students may have only started writing four or five items. A more advanced writer, however, would often fill up a page with items in a list. Students also had to go back and reread previous pieces of writing when making publishing decisions, which is exactly what we wanted them to be doing: rereading their ideas, analyzing them, and making changes if they wanted to. Going back over their work encouraged students to look for those “gems” in prior drafts that could possibly be turned into longer written pieces.

Launching into a New Adventure: It’s in the “bag”

We liked Buckner’s term for starting the writer’s notebook strategies, *launching*. In the fourth grade writing class that fall, our first notebook writing topic began with what students were experts on: themselves. Students brought home a brown paper lunch bag and placed three objects inside of the bag which described their likes, interests, or personalities. The concept of oral rehearsal (Reid and Schulze) was one we wanted to explore further with our kids. For a week, we let them talk about the objects that they brought. We had them use the 5 W’s chart as a guide when describing their objects: Who, What, When, Where, and Why. This strategy helped them focus their discussions and listen to each group member talk when it was his or her turn. Students also had the opportunity to draw their objects and add captions to go with their pictures. The drawing, discussing, and writing really helped to meet many of the students’ individual needs and allowed them to build on their strengths. The “It’s in the Me-Bag” writing activity also helped to build community within our classroom. We knew from Reid and Schulze’s research that when kids are allowed to talk with each other they are more likely to be fully engaged in, and more comfortable with, whole class discussions.

What’s in a Name? What’s on Your List?

The writer’s notebooks were now personalized: the students had finished written pieces about themselves and decorated their journals with photos and other items that represented themselves. It was now time to move on to

teaching them some beginning strategies: “The Mosts,” “Write from a List,” and “History of a Name.”

The Lists. We spent the first few weeks of school modeling our lists; our “bests,” “worsts,” “scariest,” “craziest,” etc. We also made many “most” lists, such as “I was most embarrassed when...,” “most happy when,” “most excited when,” etc., and during bell work or writing workshop, the students then added to these lists. We told them to go back to their lists and circle one or two of the items, then choose *one* and write the story behind it. In doing so, students narrowed down one idea from a large topic list, then elaborated on it, added details, and continued to develop their stories. This followed the method of teaching the trait of ideas from Culham’s book we had studied. We used several minilessons from the six traits method to encourage students to develop their ideas and add details, such as “show, don’t tell,” and “building blocks.”

History of a Name. We followed Buckner’s example and used the picture book *Chrysanthemum* by Kevin Henkes as our mentor text for this strategy. By fourth grade, most of the kids are familiar with this story but are always eager to hear it again. We discuss how important names are, and we discuss with a partner and the whole group how we feel about our names. I then tell the kids the story behind the history of my first name, Michele. I give lots of details in my story and tell them that I want them to try to remember as much about what I’ve told them as possible. The next day, I compose my “name history” story on the overhead, and purposely leave out pertinent details. The kids love to help me fill in “what’s missing” from my *name story*!

Finally, I revise in front of them, type up the final copy, thank them for collaborating with me on it, and read the story to them. For homework, the kids ask their parents about their name history, or how they feel or felt about their names or nicknames. Then they write about it in their notebooks, and we had a partner-share, and whole group share the next day during workshop. We even apply the history of a name strategy to social studies. The kids enjoy researching the history behind the names of several Michigan Native American Tribes and famous Michigan landmarks, which are part of our social studies Grade Level Content Expectations (GLCE’s).

Integration is the Key

We started with just a few launching strategies, and as

the school year went on, we implemented a few strategies from Buckner’s work to maintain the students’ interest, and build their fluency. Students read selections from the basal and chose independent novels during workshop time. We had students reflect and write after reading and listening to a piece of literature, depending on the current read-aloud and theme we were studying in language arts.

We also adapted an activity we called “Lifting a Line from Literature,” which tied in some main idea/theme skills. For example, during one of our earliest units, the students wrote about and reflected upon the theme, “risks and consequences” by responding to two pieces of literature which showcased that theme. They also had to “lift a literary line” from a story which highlighted the theme. One example a student discovered was from a biography of Mae Jemison, from which she lifted the line, “If you have a dream, you should follow it. Don’t let anyone stop you from reaching your goals.” She then went back in the text to find three examples that supported this theme, and that showed how Mae had to take a lot of risks and face many obstacles

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in order to meet her goal of becoming an astronaut. We also had students write us a one-page letter describing their reflections on their current independent novel. By working on all of the above activities, students were exploring themes, main ideas, and character motivations. Reflecting and writing about these pieces of literature made them wonder about and understand the world more. They also explored different genres: non-fiction, biography, and fantasy.

More Than We Bargained for...but in a Good Way

The writer’s notebook fit in perfectly as one of the many components of our workshop environment. It helped us to integrate reading and writing, was multi-level, and

increased students' comfort with writing. Students were taking more risks and practicing their writing. We saw them "playing around" with strategies we had modeled for them such as writing leads, using *thoughtshots* and *snapshots*, listing ideas, and adding details. Several students often asked if they could take their notebooks home, or on trips, so that they could work on their stories, or record their adventures outside of school. We were pleased that we had incorporated the writer's notebook into our language arts program, as it fulfilled so many needs for so many of our growing writers. Students were learning to reread their own writing, analyze it, and make decisions about what to revise in their pieces. They were learning strategies; they were learning how to "think" on paper. They were doing what real "writers," or "authors" actually do.

What happened to that reluctant writing student? Well, for starters, he filled an entire notebook by the end of the school year. He also began exploring free verse poetry and wrote about football, his family members, and his friends. He became one of the first volunteers to read his writing aloud during share time each day, and he thrived on having an audience. He revised and edited with his peers, which was a huge step for him in the writing process. We discovered that during workshop time, he would often choose to work on pieces in his writer's notebook after he completed his reading assignments for the morning.

What we learned as teachers was that our own classroom teacher-research and discussion process was crucial to our professional development, and the process was making a difference in the way we approached writing instruction. Our students benefited greatly: we saw that their writing had so much more voice when they had real opportunities to write, and they had plenty of choice and support through conferencing and the workshop framework. We committed to continuing our meetings and further our study into what is behind good writing instruction. We discovered that there is valuable research behind the teaching of writing, and we were excited about learning more about it and implementing the ideas.

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About the Author

Michele Kirkwood (kirkmi01@southredford.net) lives in Canton with her husband Rob and two children, Catherine and Connor. As a former classroom teacher, she taught language arts to first grade, and fourth grade students. She is now enjoying collaborating with the students, staff, and families of South Redford Public Schools in her new role as a K-5 Reading Specialist.