

January 2017

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### Recommended Citation

Hoort, Jill (2017) "The Case for Sacred Writing: Lessons from a Montessori Classroom," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 49: Iss. 2, Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol49/iss2/7>

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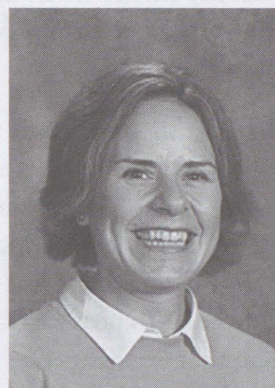
# The Case for Sacred Writing: Lessons from a Montessori Classroom

by Jill Hoort

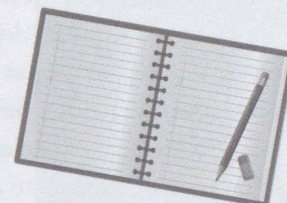
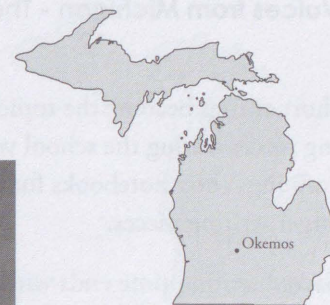
Five years ago, after spending twelve years teaching in a traditional public school environment, I began a new chapter as a teacher. I earned my Montessori Teacher Certification and began working in a public Montessori school. The lessons I have since learned about children and teaching have been and continue to be plenty, but I also recognize that Montessori classrooms reflect Maria Montessori's philosophy alongside effective teaching practices. While it is not appropriate of me to suggest an exact literacy method from Montessori for use in any classroom setting, my years in the traditional classroom setting lead me to suggest that incorporating a daily sacred writing time as part of literacy instruction is a highly effective practice that is closely related to the Montessori philosophy.

Dr. Maria Montessori said, "A child becomes a person through work." She also said, "Education is a natural process carried out by the child and is not acquired by listening to words but by experiences in the environment." When people discover I teach in a Montessori environment, many questions follow with wonderings about how the teaching and learning are different from a traditional school. I always refer to the previous quotes. In the forefront of our minds as Montessori educators is the child's plane, or stage of development. Children develop first as concrete learners before moving into abstract learning. The elementary Montessori environment is filled with natural, beautiful materials for all subject areas that both spark the imagination of the learner and are developmentally appropriate.

While a traditional classroom is not set up for learning in the same way as a Montessori classroom, there are ways teachers can infuse the philosophy into their instruction, such as in writing. In my work with teachers via our local writing project, I hear complaints about not having enough time to teach and incorporate writing into the school day. Yet, writing test scores continue to lag. An easy way to incorporate daily writing



Jill Hoort



and choice into a traditional classroom is by having a short, daily sacred writing time. It only needs to be ten minutes. I choose to start my regular writing time with this practice. As my students arrive to the classroom first thing in the morning, I have a prompt, such as a sentence stem, word, picture, quote, short poem or story, projected on the Smartboard for the students to think and write about along with the option for them to write about whatever is on their minds that morning. They write their thoughts in their writing journals.

During this daily sacred writing, I too write in my writer's notebook. Teachers seen as writers by their students is very important. Engaging in this daily writing helps the teacher understand how their writers feel—particularly if they are not sure what to write about. My daily entries are often used as examples during mini-lessons with my students. My students know that when I am writing, I am not to be disturbed, because I am doing important work, just as they are to be doing. They so enjoy hearing what I have to say as well!

In the beginning, I suggest starting small. Have the children write for a few minutes. Build the time over a few weeks as they become more fluent. This writing is not intended to be graded. Instead, it is intended to provide an outlet for thinking and ideas, but more importantly, to build stamina for the act of writing. Colleagues who have used this method in their classrooms have reported it to be the favored time of day from their students because they finally have a chance to write for their own purposes. Additionally, these



short entries become the topics and fuel for larger writing pieces during the school year. My writers are always “mining” their notebooks for topics when we work on larger writing pieces.

Sacred writing time ends with a short sharing. Sometimes I ask for a few volunteers, and sometimes I have students partner with a peer to share their thoughts for the day. The intention in doing this is to allow writing voices to be heard as well as to provide new ideas to others. How many times have we heard someone tell a story and we have a connection to it as a listener? I encourage the students to add to their entries for another minute after the short sharing time.

Often, we teachers become so concerned with getting through the standards, achieving high test scores, meeting district expectations of core program fidelity, and fulfilling our agendas that we forget the number one reason we are present in our classrooms each day: to create and foster learners who are curious about their world and provide them with agency to take their learning beyond our classrooms. Our students have intentions, experiences, and feelings along with many needs. I have come to know that one of their needs is to be able to write during the day about something important to them without the teacher putting marks all over it. Utilizing sacred writing time in the school day is a very easy way to provide students with the outlet they need.

For several summers now, I have taught sessions of a writing camp at Michigan State University for elementary-aged learners, usually in grades 3-5. When the young writers arrive to camp on the first day and we get to know each other, I always ask them what their intentions are as writers that week. At each session every summer, I resoundingly hear “I can’t wait to write MY story—not what my TEACHER wants me to write about.” How powerful those words are! We, as teachers, must not forget that our students DO have motivation to write. They have identities and purposes for writing that reach beyond teachers’ intentions.

My five years in the public Montessori have led me to ask many questions about the lessons I teach and the work the learners are involved in each day. Is the

precious time in our day maximizing learning? Are the learners engaged in appropriate work for their intentions? Am I taking a breath to reflect on their needs? These are important questions that should be asked in ALL learning environments, not just a Montessori environment. Providing learners, a time to express their thoughts, wonderings, feelings, and imaginations is time well spent—even if it is a short period of time. The results of utilizing sacred writing time are rich, hopefully lighting the writer’s spark that is sleeping within all learners. That seems worth more than choosing to stick to our teacherly intentions sometimes.

How to use Sacred Writing in your classroom starting Monday:

- ☐ Carve out ten minutes of time; think about using the moments before or after transitions.
- ☐ Start small and build stamina over time.
- ☐ Make sure everyone has a place to record their writing—a notebook or folder with loose leaf paper work fine.
- ☐ Provide a sentence stem (e.g., A time I was surprised was), a word (e.g., write from the word “pizza” whatever comes to your mind), a quote, a poem, a picture (e.g., what happened just before or after this was taken), a cartoon (e.g., ask what this makes you think about) a short video (e.g., Kid President provides some thought-provoking ideas) and *always* offer the option to write about whatever is on your mind.
- ☐ End with a brief opportunity for sharing with the group or a partner.

## Author Biography

**Jill Hoort** has been a teacher for sixteen years and currently is an upper elementary teacher at Okemos Public Montessori. She also serves as the elementary co-director of the Red Cedar Writing Project at Michigan State University.

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