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Wizardry in Writing Craft?

Mary Anna Kruch

At First Sight

Even before I opened the book to the inside Author's Notes for *Writing Whizardry: 60 Mini-Lessons to Teach Elaboration & Writer's Craft* by Maity Schrecengost (2001), I had my doubts. Royal blue background with glittery-gold stars and a wand-like pencil suggested that magic mini-lessons are the author's answer to crafting writers. I have, since my novice middle school teaching days in the '70s, shunned the idea of scripted lessons, no matter what the intention. Classroom teachers today are under increasing pressure to improve student writers and so may pick up *Writing Whizardry* hoping to finally get the assistance they need. But the presentation of the lesson and the invitation to write often need the most improvement. Schrecengost seems to say that graceful, elaborative writing grows out of teacher-directed lessons that do not necessarily reflect units of study and themes, nor take the child's prior knowledge into consideration. Isn't writing more likely to seem magical, graceful, and elaborative when ideas and insights come directly from the learner who can then be set free to express his or her unique self?

Browsing through the opening pages of this volume composed entirely of scripted lessons prepared for grades three through six, I read the introduction, hoping to find a sound philosophical base. After all, any book that claimed in the title to teach author's craft must have merit, right? After the first page, I found my answer.

Part of our responsibility as educators is to make informed decisions about methods presented

to us and look carefully at the supportive research. While the inside *About the Author* described Maity Schrecengost as "a former classroom teacher who had had the good fortune to sit at the feet of writing guru, Donald Graves, for several years in preparation for becoming one of a cadre of teachers involved in the Pennsylvania Department of Education Writing Project," I found myself wondering if I should go back and re-read Graves' *A Fresh Look at Writing* (1994) to see if maybe he had changed his perception of how children are motivated to write. Naturally, all readers and learners who sit at a guru's feet are interpretive, so perhaps, I projected, Schrecengost came away with an interpretation differing from what I believe lights fires under children's fingers and pulls at their passions to produce graceful, elaborative writing. It should be noted that, realistically, some children's writing is elaborative without necessarily emitting "grace." Writing in a child's individual voice, including his or her diverse views about the world and self, can be quite elaborative and often graceful.

Moving On

In a nutshell, this is what the author purports: once students are given suggested mini-lessons on both writing craft and elaboration in a systematic way, based on their *level* (apprentice, novice, advanced), they will become graceful, elaborative writers. The author notes that since expository and narrative writing involve many shared crafts/literary devices, the lessons are not written for one or the other. She also encourages

teachers to begin their *own* writing workshops once they get the hang of these mini-lessons!

Since ALL teachers presumably are the audience to whom these kernels of wisdom are directed, and I am one such teacher, why would anyone want to use a new set of prescribed lessons when Warriner's has existed for years? After carefully examining the first three lessons, along with the opening explanatory pages of the book, the main difference I see (and it could be a huge difference to some) is that the students copy the lessons from the board and the teacher's mouth into their composition books. Understanding that one often learns by doing, the author could have a point. Graves has suggested this activity. However, I believe the method Schreengost offers differs substantially from Graves as well as that of Lucy McCormick Calkins (1991) and Ralph Fletcher (1993) because these writers view children as capable authors who possess a growing storehouse of potential craft. Schreengost appears to think most children are unaware of the skill upon which a lesson is focused, and that they need to be lead rather than invited to write. The mini-lessons Graves recommends spring from the writer's need to know a specific skill or particular craft and the teacher plans lessons which build upon what the writer already knows. The lessons also should connect to ongoing classroom projects such as the creation of text for an original picture book.

Red Flags

While I saw some excellent ideas in *Writing Whizardry*, such as "Learning to choose and focus on a topic is central to learning to write well" and "most of a young writer's practice should be on self-selected topics" (7), I also repeatedly noted items that I refer to as RED FLAGS. Some of these include the use in each underdeveloped mini-lesson of "non-examples," (negative statements at the beginning of lessons noting young writers' failure to adequately demonstrate the skill targeted) and the lack of integration of lessons to a larger, experienced-based unit of themed study.

In my opinion, non-examples can be subjective and serve no useful purpose as a teaching tool when taken out of the context of an authentic writing piece; students' examination of the writing for a targeted skill and its desirability or appropriateness in a particular writing genre would benefit students much more. In my classroom experience, I have found that students are interested in and able to identify writers' craft and often apply what is presented in a mini-lesson *if it is presented in a positive format and they can see the connection to their own writing*. When we learn the nuances of reading, which is closely connected to writing, we do not emphasize the non-reading behaviors. The same is true for writing. Writing workshops should free the writers to express voice, consider audience, and make application from authentic examples to their own.

An example of a negative statement to open Mini-lesson 2 is "Children tend to be non-specific in their writing" (17). Mini-lesson 3 opens with "Because the scene or event is so vivid in the writer's own mind, beginning writers often fail to adequately describe it for the readers" (18). How much more enjoyable for me, the reader, to have seen this statement written with more respect for young writers, and how much more motivated students would be to have a lesson presented which praises what they HAVE learned, and then builds upon it.

Finally, I see no direct connection in any of the mini-lessons to a bigger, thematic unit keyed to the curriculum and, more importantly, to the children's own diverse experiences. Lesson extensions should be more than the proposed samples of revisions that Schreengost suggests. Students could study picture books, trade books, newspapers, and other classmates' work for examples of the targeted writer's craft or elaboration skill and then have a follow-up dialog with peers or a conference with the teacher to reinforce its relative worth and instances of use. Then perhaps a quickwrite employing the craft or skill could be followed by more peer/audience feedback. Peer talk is generally underestimated

in the presentation of the literature on writing, and this volume is no exception.

Lesson Success

Schrecengost lists nine predictors of a successful writing program. Some of these predictors, located on pages 12-13, are *ownership*, *predictability*, *structure*, and *direct instruction*. Success for writers depends, to a greater extent, on students' motivation, the relationship of the writing to their diverse lives, and the encouragement the teacher and peers/audience give following the reading of each piece. The teacher's own motivational enthusiasm, modeling, shared writing and knowledge, as well as the context in which she presents the lessons, and the application to the children's needs and interests are other important factors that can influence the success of a writing approach. In the end, it is the willingness of a teacher to teach any lesson to all levels of writers, be they beginning, intermediate, or advanced, and the degree to which she is able to accommodate that will nurture the graceful, elaborative writing Schrecengost aims for in her book.

Yay or Nay

Because I am not convinced the author's lessons would "work" without a lot of individual modification by practicing, full-time educators on an as-needed/if needed basis, I would not recommend this book to a colleague teaching at the middle school level. In addition, I believe the approach, if directly applied, could be detrimental to preservice and novice teachers who have much less classroom exposure to how children learn and what inspires them to write.

I would instead encourage middle level colleagues of all ages to actively take part in all steps of the writing process with students as writers, beginning with an experiential prewriting activity through the publication of a final draft. Lessons presented in writing workshops should integrate the children's own life experiences. Writing needs to address cultural identity, friends,

family and school, pets, hopes and fears, global issues, and the qualities that make them uniquely human. Students need to know they are being heard, learn to accept and appreciate diverse perspectives, and to embrace these differences. In order for children to meaningfully write and elaborate, they must be somehow personally connected. Mini-lessons need to be tailored whenever possible to thematic, integrated units of study, as well as daily, ungraded writing. When students write frequently, they are more apt to see it as a natural vehicle for expression and revel in it. When teachers expose their students to great literature and talk about what makes it great, write and learn *with* their students, weave craft lessons into the fabric of the class, greet each student's writing and the talent he or she brings to it with enthusiasm, provide an audience and time to reflect, then the students will be better equipped to produce writing that is truly magical. The students, not the method, will be the true Writing Craft Wizards.

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About the Author

Mary Anna Kruch is a frequent conference presenter and a part-time instructor at the university level. She teaches sixth grade language arts and social studies at Williamston Middle School.