

## Writing Workshop Approach

The writing workshop approach is strongly advocated by a number of experts in the field of composing. Atwell, Romano, and Rief recommend it for middle and high school students. Donald Graves and Lucy Calkins also advocate this approach for elementary students. Similar preferences can be found to a lesser degree in the writings of Donald Murray and Peter Elbow, both of whom focus mainly on the college level.

Many people upon first reading about writing workshops see a laissez faire situation much like the open classroom of the 1960s. On the surface there are similarities in descriptions and to the casual observer in classrooms where writing workshops are conducted, there are similarities in appearance. However, what makes writing workshops work is what was missing in the open classroom: a sound underlying structure based on a clearly defined philosophy developed from a solid research base. In short, in the 1960s most teachers who tried open classroom approaches were not at all sure why they were doing this, what they hoped to achieve, and how to provide instruction and monitor progress within this environment. The open classroom was an import from England. Unfortunately, the advocates who tried to transplant it here told us a great deal about what not to do but very little about what to do. The approach failed not because it was flawed but because teachers didn't know how to make it work and nobody was around with the information.

Writing workshops are different. Yes, they are student-centered. Yes, students do have a great deal of control over their writing. But in the writing workshop the teacher does not simply stand back and let the learning (or lack of it) take place. Rather, the teacher is deeply immersed in the work in progress. More than that, the teacher creates the environment, supports and facilitates learning, provides instruction when needed, and carefully monitors progress up to and including setting requirements for students who need that kind of structure.

Before going further it is necessary to point out that students have to be taught how to function in a writing workshop setting. You can't just start out with an open situation and expect students to respond. Younger students who have had little exposure to school or those who have worked in workshops before will need less of an introduction than older students who are accustomed to being told what to do all the time. Even high school students who say they are fed up with school structure have a difficult time adjusting to a writing workshop approach. Therefore, any teacher who wants to attempt this needs to start with some kind of structure and a clear set of guidelines for behavior and work production. Later this structure can be modified and the guidelines adjusted or relaxed often in conjunction with student recommendations.

What should a fully functioning writing workshop look like? There seem to be 5 factors which distinguish the writing workshop.

\* First, there is total involvement in composing. All students are engaged in prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, or sharing/publishing.

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\* Second, there is diversity. Students are working on writing that they have chosen to do, so all kinds of writing are going on simultaneously and students are at all different stages in the writing process.

\* Third, the environment is cooperative. As a result, there is a constant hum of voices rather than silence. Students work in small groups, pairs, and alone. They are free to move about the room as the need dictates.

\* Fourth, the teacher knows the current work of each student as well as the progress each has been making. In many cases, the teacher also has goals for individuals. Related to this monitoring and planning for instruction, the teacher is actively engaged working with individuals and small groups throughout the workshop time. Even when he/she is not conferring with students, he/she is observing and making notes about students' composing processes and products.

\* Fifth, students behave autonomously. When they finish a piece of work, they know what to do next. They do not wait for teacher directions or for a new assignment, nor do they refer to an assignment sheet to see what they are supposed to do. When students come into the classroom or begin the time set aside for writing workshop, they know what to do and they can begin working immediately. They make their own decisions about when to get help with revising and editing and whom to ask for assistance.

Occasionally there is some kind of special event--a guest speaker, a videotape, maybe even a field trip. Occasionally there is a day set aside for public readings of specially chosen papers. Occasionally there is a whole class lesson on a skill everyone seems to be having trouble with. For the most part, though, one day's work in a writing workshop looks much like the next.

What are the advantages of a writing workshop approach? One advantage is that this approach builds on what we know about the natural way that young children learn to speak. It allows them to extend that natural process of trial and error learning into the realm of writing. It also allows them to control the difficulty level so that they adjust the risk factor to match their own sense of competence. Another advantage is that motivation comes from the student. The teacher does not have to expend time and energy convincing students that they should work hard on the tasks they have been given. Another advantage is that instruction can be individualized and students can progress at their own rates. Probably the most important advantage is that students spend nearly all of the available time involved in writing or in some activity related to writing. They do not wait for instructions or wait for special help or wait for classmates to finish or wait for papers to be passed out or wait for the teacher to grade their work. When it functions well, the writing workshop is one of the most efficient methods of composition instruction.

But efficient and effective are two different factors. Lecturing is also efficient for covering the material. The problem is that it isn't very effective. Whether or not the writing workshop is effective depends on two things. First, how effectiveness is defined. And second, whether or not the teacher makes provisions for the necessary instruction. If the goals of instruction are fluency and self-confidence as a writer, the writing workshop has the potential for success. If one goal of instruction is learning to write in many different [nodes for different purposes and addressing different audiences, then the workshop approach can still be used, but students will have to be allowed fewer choices of tasks. If students self-select all of their tasks, they are not likely to produce as wide a range of discourse as they need to practice. Additionally, most of us probably hope that the students will gain some knowledge about the different modes of discourse and develop some criteria for judging quality. Further, students may need to be introduced to some

concepts that they might not discover on their own. In short, they may need more than just practice; they may need formal instruction. For this to occur, the teacher must plan for it.

But that need not mean planning whole class instruction. Rather the teacher may plan to work one-on-one in conferences to provide individual instruction. Or he/she may plan to teach needed skills to small groups. Or he/she may plan regularly scheduled mini-lessons which introduce various discourse forms which students can list and try immediately or later or not at all. The teacher can plan sharing opportunities wherein students can introduce modes they have used to classmates and describe what they have learned about writing these modes. The teacher may even plan some whole class instruction during which he/she models writing a certain kind of discourse or models a particular writing strategy which students then practice through rough drafting or by using some of their own work-in-progress. The particular method or combination of methods has to be chosen by the teacher depending upon the needs of students and the goals of instruction. And the teacher must monitor the learning closely so as to determine progress and to decide whether or not the current format of writing workshop is having the desired effect or whether the format needs to be modified.

One of the keys to insuring effectiveness seems to be record keeping. Atwell recommends taking a maximum of 3 minutes at the start of each workshop to collect a status-of-the-class report. Each student states verbally what he/she intends to do that period. This helps the teacher chart progress and identify which students need immediate assistance and which students can wait until later in the period. However, Atwell believes that every student should receive some teacher attention every period.

Other teachers make it a point to confer with every student each day to gather data about the student's writing. These teachers carry with them a notepad or index cards or even a tape recorder for making anecdotal records of each encounter. Other teachers provide students with a calendar. At the end of each work session students report what they plan to do the next day and turn in the calendars. The teacher reviews these each evening and identifies possible interventions to be implemented the next day. Other teachers have students maintain a log in which they record what they accomplish each day. If the teacher is unable to confer with everyone that day, he/she can review the logs of those who were skipped.

Many teachers who are using a writing workshop approach also maintain some kind of checklist on each student. Often this checklist includes several processes which can be observed and checked off. Some checklists also include skills that the teacher expects students to become aware of and/or master. These, too, can be checked off as they appear in student conversation and written products. These checklists provide an overview of student progress and patterns of work.

Nearly all teachers who conduct writing workshops have students maintain writing folders. Some teachers have students keep records of their work in these folders. They make lists of writings they have done and the processes they used by having a column for prewriting, one for drafting, another for revising, another/or editing, and one more for sharing/publishing. Students check the columns that apply. Some teachers also have students keep lists in their folder of what they have learned. On the list might appear items such as the following:

I have learned to put periods at the ends of sentences.

I have learned to punctuate dialogue.

I have learned to check my work for misspelled words.

I have learned to move paragraphs around to find the best arrangement.

This list often acts as a reference guide for students. They check it to make sure they have applied what they have learned before they consider a paper finished.

One of the most difficult factors, if not the most difficult, is evaluation. Assigning grades to students who are working in a writing workshop situation is extremely problematic. While the teacher may have a great deal of data about what students are doing and have done and the progress they have made, this information cannot easily be translated into a grade. Checklists help, but they tend to promote a set of standards which contradicts allowing students to progress at their own rate. Even when fluency is the central goal, should the grade be based on the amount of writing produced or should the factor of increase over initial fluency be taken into account? And will basing the grade entirely on the quantity of writing send the message to students that quality is of little significance?

Most advocates of writing workshops would probably prefer that grades not be given at all, but in many school districts that is not a realistic possibility. An alternative which is being used in many classrooms is directly involving students in evaluating their own work via an evaluation conference or a written evaluation report in which the student assesses what he/she has learned during the grading period. Some teachers are using this approach in conjunction with the creation of a writing portfolio which contains pieces selected from the folder which contains all the writing produced. Another approach is to allow students to choose pieces which they want to be graded. If this approach is used, the teacher should periodically require submissions; otherwise, he/she will be swamped with papers to grade at the same time that report cards have to be made out. Periodic grading also is useful if parents frequently request progress reports on their children.

There are no easy solutions to the matter of evaluating in a writing workshop, but then evaluating writing and writing progress has always been a problem. Using a writing workshop approach may in some ways complicate the process but the evaluation which comes from a collection of data which includes both writing processes as well as products is likely to be a more realistic assessment of student learning than an average based entirely on grades given to products alone.

Recommended Further Reading:

Atwell, N. (1987). *In the middle; Writing, reading, and learning with adolescents*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.

Dudley, M. (1989). The writing workshop: Structuring for success. *English Journal*, 78 (1), 28-32.

Feeley, J., Strickland, D., & Wepner, S. (Eds.) (1991). *Process reading and writing: A literature-based approach*. NY: Teachers College, Columbia.

Harwayne, S. (1992). Lasting impressions: Weaving literature into the writing workshop. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

McVitty, W. (Ed.) (1986). Getting it together: Organising the reading-writing classroom. Rozelle, NSW, Australia: Primary English Teaching Association.

Rief, L. (1992). Seeking Diversity. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Romano, T. (1987). Clearing the way: Working with teenage writers. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Simpson, M. (1986). What am I supposed to do while they're writing? Language Arts, 63 (7), 680--684.

Vogt, M. (1991). An observation guide for supervisors and administrators: Moving toward integrated reading/language arts instruction. The Reading Teacher, 45 (3), 206-211. (especially the Observation Guide Used to Develop an Integrated Reading/Language Arts Program on pp. 208-209)