Motivating Reluctant Creative Writers

Rebecca Mitchell

Inquiry Paper, April 2011

Instructor: Jim Field
Preamble

My motivation for writing this paper was my desire to understand Derek and Ryley. Derek and Ryley are in Grade 5, in a Grade 5/6 split classroom. During Language Arts, they would stare into space, with the blank page of their writing journal in front of them, an unmoving hand, and a look of despondency on their faces. As the student teacher in that classroom, I would sit with them, explain the instructions, help them write down the instructions, and even help them plan out what to write. I would then come back the next day, and sometimes, the week after, and they would still sit, their pencil static, and the assignment unstarted. As a child, I would spend hours in bed, thinking about what I was going to write at school the next day. Language Arts was more than a subject for me, it was an escape route into a different world, where anything was possible, and the only limits were the restrictions of my imagination. So what was wrong with Derek and Ryley? At first, I was worried that they had not eaten, or that they had been up too late the night before, and were unable to find the focus for self-driven work. However, as time progressed, I realized that they held little interest for writing in the parameters of the assignments given to them.

Both boys enjoyed reading non-fiction. One day, I brought an encyclopedia into school, and I spent some time during LA talking to them about the Mona Lisa; the boys were fascinated with the story of the theft of the Mona Lisa, which I shared with them, and so we researched the story on the internet. One day, Ryley expressed frustration with the novel he was reading – it was a novel about a young man who went to fight in Dieppe during the Second World War. I took Ryley along to the library, and we got out the encyclopedia, and poured over pictures of Dieppe, Canadian troop ships, and London, so that he could understand the references made in the novel, and build some context for the story. Ryley asked me every week after that, if I could read the encyclopedia with him.

Science was the lesson which really seemed to engage the boys, as they immersed themselves in building circuits, and cars. Their tendency to excel at kinesthetic learning came to the fore when they experienced an art lesson, given by students from Mount Royal College. The boys made masks, which had beautiful detail, and were very creative in their design and use of colour. They did not sit and stare, neither were their hands empty. On the contrary, they ran around, excitedly, and were visibly proud of their work, as they experienced the praise of their peers. In that moment, I realized that the boys were very visual, hand-on learners, who were stimulated by colour and the creativity offered through learning opportunities. I believe that every child has a ‘hook’, or a metaphorical currency which will motivate them to learn in different situations, we just have to find out what it is.

With Derek and Ryley in mind, I set about inquiring into what I could do for the students like them, who were uninspired to write. How could I use teaching techniques, which spoke to the visual and kinesthetic learners in the class, to help students experience the joy of writing?
The Challenge

Reluctant Writer...

Who Me...Write?

anything?

HMMMM

How Much?

a page...?

HMMMM,

Maybe...

How about –

blood and guts

or aliens

or...

Last Night’s DVD

ok

i’m done

can i go?

Kellie Buis

The Challenge of Reclaiming Reluctant Writers (p.5)
Introduction

Writing gives us a means to share our ideas, information, and knowledge, to reflect on experiences, and to explore different layers of meaning. Writing can invoke beauty, emotion, and wonder. Above all, writing allows us to express ourselves in ways which give others a new insight into who we are. Without the ability to write effectively, we miss out on opportunities and experiences in life; without the ability to write effectively, we may never experience the transformational effect which our clearly and concisely written ideas can have on others, or the joy of moving someone through our written words, or the comfort of knowing that the words we wrote consoled and encouraged someone when they needed it the most. Writing gives us another means to find our voice, and to engage with the world around us.

There is an inextricable link between writing, reading, listening and speaking; each one of these skills supports the other, and our teaching of one of the skills is not as rich and effective if not supported by the others. Feret & Smith (2010) speak to this integrated nature of writing with reading, listening, and speaking (p.38):

*Reading and writing represent literacy in its most familiar forms: the process of scanning letters or symbols to gain meaning and the recording of thought in somewhat permanent form. Listening and speaking is the second pair of language skills that identify a literate people. Speech is a mode of oral communication, expressing thought; listening assumes a thoughtful consideration of sound, whether verbal or artistic. Listening is also an attribute of student conduct, the core of classroom management plans. In tandem, these four literacy processes shape cognition.*

Children become aware of the function of written language to meet their needs, whether those needs are social or academic, to receive and to give information, to express themselves, to explore, to increase their knowledge, or to record information. We can see this perspective expressed in the Program of Study for Language Arts:

*Children learn language as they use it to communicate their thoughts, feelings and experiences; establish relationships with family members and friends; and strive to make sense and order of their world.(p.1)*

*Reading and writing are powerful means of communicating and learning. They enable students to extend their knowledge and use of language, increase their understanding of themselves and others, and experience enjoyment and personal satisfaction.*

*Reading provides students with a means of accessing the ideas, views and experiences of others. By using effective reading skills and strategies, students construct meaning and develop thoughtful and critical interpretations of a variety of texts. Writing enables students to explore, shape and clarify their thoughts, and to communicate them to others. By using effective writing strategies, they discover and refine ideas and compose and revise with increasing confidence and skill. (pages 2 – 3).*
In the course of this paper, I propose to explore how teaching practices for writing can effectively integrate reading, speaking and listening to motivate reluctant writers.

Before we can begin to explore teaching strategies, we first need to be aware of our own assumptions and beliefs around reluctant writers. By examining our own assumptions and beliefs, we can become aware of how our attitudes toward reluctant writers are shaped, and how those attitudes have influenced our approach to helping reluctant writers in the classroom. Increasing our awareness of assumptions and beliefs that we hold, will increase our effectiveness in monitoring and evaluating our approach in the classroom.

To coin a turn of phrase used by Buis (2007), in thinking about how to turn pencil breakers into willing writers, I would like to examine the following themes:

1. What are the assumptions about and realities of working with reluctant writers?
2. How can these assumptions and realities inform our teaching practice?
3. How do we balance direct teaching with the writing process?
4. How can we teach writing skills to reluctant writers?
5. What kind of classroom environment and community do we need to establish to teach these skills effectively and successfully?
6. How do we access writing?

In their book *The Writing Genre*, Jamison Rog & Kropp (2004) name three different elements of writing which are present in a balanced writing program (p.8): assigned writing; self-selected writing, and writing to learn. Due to the enormous scope of the subject of how to teach writing, my focus will be on motivating students in their creative writing. It is important to distinguish between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation; the type of motivation I am referring to here, is the internal desire of the student to write, attested to by their engagement in the writing process.

Throughout this essay, I am holding the philosophy of Regie Routman (2005) in mind:

*Excellent and enjoyable writing needs to become central to the everyday life of the classroom...students successfully transfer their writing skills to high-stakes writing tests when we focus on teaching writing well for authentic purposes and real readers (p.4).*
What Are The Assumptions About And The Realities Of Working With Reluctant Writers?

“Picture a student in your class who is really struggling with reading and writing. This student doesn’t like to read, has difficulty sitting still and paying attention, and turns in crumpled, half-completed homework. We’ve all had students like this. But chances are, as you picture this child in your mind, you are thinking of one of the boys in your class.”


Teacher Assumptions

Most people who have stepped foot in a classroom during creative writing time would probably have pictured a boy in their head when reading this quote. Ralph Fletcher, the father of four boys, is the author of a book, Boy Writers; Reclaiming their Voice, and has delved into how to encourage boys to write creatively. Fletcher cites Shelley Peterson (2000), a professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, to make a point about our assumptions around boy writers. Peterson asked students to analyze writing samples; four hundred students were asked to analyze nine writing samples and guess whether they had been written by a male of a female. Students guessed that the author was female when stories were descriptive and well-written, and guessed that the author was male when these stories contained spelling errors and poor grammar (p.22).

Boys seem to develop fine motor skills later than girls, and score lower than girls on standardized tests relating to Language Arts, and it is the experience of many a teacher that many boys do not enjoy creative writing classes, but is it making an assumption to say that boys do not enjoy and are not capable of enjoying creative writing? At the staff room table in my field school, there was much animated discussion in response to my questions about motivating reluctant writers. A point of curiosity for me has always been why there is such an emphasis on teaching creative writing. The learning specialist and other teachers’ hypothesis was that teaching is a profession dominated by women, and women favour reading fiction, so that is what has been traditionally taught to the students. This leads to my next point of inquiry – is it the way in which creative writing is taught which discourages boys, and leaves them lacking in intrinsic motivation?

In thinking about what motivates boys to write, I myself was reminded of my own sense of unease as a student teacher, when faced with boys who wanted to write about werewolves. In reading Fletcher (2006), I was taken into the boys’ world of fictitious writing, which differed considerably from what I would have chosen to write about as a child, into a world filled with video games, blood and guts, aliens, and violence. After having read Fletcher’s book, I felt that I had become somewhat more open-minded in accepting that some boys found it difficult to write about anything else. However, I determined that only boys with little parental guidance around reading material, video games and TV watching could be so unimaginative as to consider these types of subjects for topics of creative writing. My rather rude
awakening came five days after finishing the book, when I found myself in my son’s fourth grade classroom, participating in a student-led conference. My husband and myself could do nothing but laugh along with my son, as he beamed with pride, showing us his creative writing portfolio. His first story was based on the tale of Little Red Riding Hood, except that a cougar and a guy with a truck were involved in the story. The illustrations were filled with blood, guts and brains:
I am somewhat ‘politically correct’ in my approach to parenting my son, and was a little shocked at the way in which he managed to get some form of violence into every story in his portfolio. My husband looked at me after we had left, and remarked that our son does not read violent books, do violent video games, or watch violence on TV. His conclusion was “it’s in our genes.” By that point, my eyes had been opened. What interested me was the teacher’s reaction; she calmly stated that this was the type of topic which the boys liked to write about. The teacher had managed to work with my son to encourage him to write and develop stories, even if the subject matter was a little bit ‘off’ by some people’s standards. I realized that I had held the belief that certain themes favoured by the boys were as not appropriate to write about, and had I blocked out how to consider working with students around those themes.

Another assumption I think adults are apt to make is that elementary school students are not capable of abstract thinking, and therefore cannot write reflectively or analytically. Children have a wealth of experience to draw from, and some are able to reflect on their experiences at an earlier stage in their development than others. In my mind, it is our responsibility to give children the language to tap into their higher level thinking skills, and enable them to reflect, analyze, synthesize and evaluate when they write.

Buis (2007) presents the following additional myths or assumptions regarding young writers (pp. 9-18):

- Teachers spend enough time on the teaching of writing in their classrooms
- Teachers who do not enjoy writing and who do not write, can nevertheless teach writing
- It is the teacher’s job to motivate the student to write by providing topics and by prompting and cajoling them into writing
- Good readers are typically good writers, and can imitate the styles of writers by reading as writers
- There are two types of writers – those who can write and those who cannot, which usually includes reluctant writers
- Writing is a silent, solitary activity
- The writing process is the same for all young writers
- For reluctant writers, learning about how to write comes before the writing itself.
Throughout my exploration of how to motivate reluctant writers, I became aware of the influence (sometimes negative) of my own opinions around what constituted good writing, and suitable writing topics for children. Routman (2005) quotes Lisa Delpit, who reminds us of this in her musings on how some teachers are tempted to communicate less with students whom they perceive as being language deficient:

“It is this teaching behaviour and not the language of the child, no matter how different, that creates the problem for learners.” (p.81)

**Realities: Student Fears & Needs**

An underlying cause for some students’ reluctance to write is their fear of appearing vulnerable. William Pollack (cited in Fletcher, p.52), author of *Real Boys: Rescuing our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood* (1998) argues that a ‘boy code’ prevents boys from expressing affection in writing, as it makes them look vulnerable. Instead, boys create stories full of danger and violence, in which the characters triumph over difficult obstacles. In the Newsweek article “The Trouble with Boys” (cited in Fletcher, p.36) Michael Thompson says that, “Boys measure everything they do or say by a single yardstick: does it make me look weak?” Newsweek writer Peg Tyre adds, “That’s part of the reason that video games have such a powerful hold on boys; the action is constant, they can calibrate just how hard the challenges will be and, when they lose, the defeat is private.” (2006, p.49). If the teacher’s reality is working with the students’ assumption that the act of writing is ‘soft’ and ‘emotional’, then the teacher’s reality becomes how to work with this assumption to create a classroom community where the students feel they can take risks with their writing and share a different side of themselves with their peers.

---

*Many boys have never seen writing as a viable option for them. Some are not “good students” in the traditional sense, so teachers figured if they produced anything it was a miracle...Many of these boys get teachers who instead of seeing the inherent good in a piece of writing see only the deficits and ways to make it “better”...For the boys, every assigned piece can be a nightmare because it is never good enough. The road is too long so they give up before they even start.*

*Fourth-Grade Literacy Teacher*

*Ralph Fletcher. Boy Writers: Reclaiming their Voices. 2006, p.3*
Sarah Mullins in her article, *Assessment; Analytical thinking tool or creative stumbling block?*, describes her experiences in a primary school classroom in England, where she was helping one struggling student to write a poem. His fabulous description of eating a Mars bar was greeted with judgment by the teacher, who was more concerned with students’ performance on the national assessment. Mullins muses...

“According to Ajex Osborn, creative theorist and the man behind 'Brainstorming', creative ideas are trapped in our minds because of the fear of rejection. He claims that the most detrimental thing one can do with regards to creativity is criticize. He advocates that the judgment of ideas must be withheld until a later time. But isn't that what our children are subjected to every day? Judgment upon judgment tell them what to do to improve, to achieve those higher levels while simultaneously these judgments reinforce that their work is somehow not good enough, somehow always lacking.”

Buis (2007) stresses that teaching writing needs to be intentional, modeled by an enthusiastic teacher, and provide deep and rich opportunities for students to explore different genres in a meaningful way. She suggests that the following critical success factors needs to be fulfilled for students to be reclaimed as writers (p.19/p.32):

- The need to keep writing private and personal
- The need to trust in intrinsic motivation
- The need to have choice in the task
- The need to recognize writing idiosyncrasies
- The need for intrinsic reasons to write
- The need for active, social writing
- The need to know how to be an ‘eyewitness writer’
- The need for accessible genres
- The need for playfulness.

In order to ensure that our teaching of writing is meeting the needs of our learners, addressing their concerns, and challenging us to improve in our own practice, our teaching of writing needs to be informed, prepared, and intentional. This intentionality extends to the way in which we create the physical space in which children write, how we build a sense of trust, rapport and community in the classroom, how we talk about and model writing, and how we involve parents in their child’s writing experience.
How Can These Assumptions And Realities Inform Our Teaching Practice?

Creating a Sense of Wonder Through Shared Experiences

“I don’t know what to write about Miss” was a frequent lament of students in my field class. Sometimes, in a teacher’s rush to teach writing conventions and cover the objectives of the curriculum, giving the students experiences to write about can fall by the wayside. In order for writing to be intrinsic, we need to help students to discover things which they think are worth writing about. By sharing a common experience, such as a field trip, reading a book together, watching a video, or sharing a picture, we can create discrepant events, which provide a springboard for inquiry by provoking a sense of wonder and curiosity. In creating these shared experiences, we can convey to students that there are worthwhile things to write about all around us, if we only take the time to observe, listen and wonder. Writing can be a social event, as students notice and record events together, reflect on their experiences with their peers, and bounce ideas off each other. At Langevin Science School, the students are fortunate to participate in many field trips related to science. One display I saw there involved students using the Comic Life computer program to bring to life photographs of the various field trips, with graphic novel style layout and narrative to portray observations and reflections. William F. Hammond, in his article, *The Creative Journal: A Power Tool for Learning*, advocates journal writing for observing and reflecting on nature. In addition to the opportunities to record observations, Hammond asserts that the environmental education journal is consistent with brain research, which has shown us that drawing and writing about something we have just experienced fixers that experience in long-term memory and stimulates relational thought (Green Teacher, p.69).

Becoming a writer means becoming more observant to the world around us, and thinking of everything we observe or experience as a source of potential writing material. Buis (2007) suggests giving students a jeweler’s loupe or a magnifying glass with which to observe what is around them in a new light. She extends this idea to creating windows or window panes through which to look at subjects (p.25). The idea behind what she defines as ‘Eyewitness learning activities’ is that as the students look through their lenses, the distractions of the world are left out.

Becoming a writer means becoming more observant to the world around us, and thinking of everything we observe or experience as a source of potential writing material. Buis (2007) suggests giving students a jeweler’s loupe or a magnifying glass with which to observe what is around them in a new light. She extends this idea to creating windows or window panes (see images below) through which to look at subjects (p.25). The idea behind what she defines as ‘Eyewitness learning activities’ is that when the students look through their lenses, the distractions of the world are left out.
Rather than dictating the topic to students, or allowing them to free write with no notice, we can send students off during non-writing time, with a notebook to record what they see, hear, feel, taste, smell and experience. Writing is a way of being, not just a task, and we need to encourage students to think like writers when they are outside of class.

Embracing an experiential approach to writing allows teachers to easily integrate writing lessons with other subject areas. Social Studies in particular lends itself to voyages of discovery in writing. In my field school, I planned a social unit relating to Citizenship and Democracy on the Iroquois. I brought in a guest speaker from the Aboriginal Education Unit to speak to students on the Iroquois and to lead the students through a problem solving session, using the consensual decision-making process of the Iroquois. Given that First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples use storytelling to teach, we were able to bring our guest in for another session, to speak to the students about storytelling in native culture. The students experienced firsthand how stories are used to talk about creation, nature, and life lessons. They were then invited to write a story about an animal using the genre of writing which describes how an animal came to have a particular characteristic.

Similarly, students at our school experienced having an artist in residence at their school, as well as a play based on Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. After experiencing both events, they were invited to retell, relate and reflect on their experiences. In both cases, they developed a sense of critical voice, as they learnt how to respectfully convey what they liked and disliked about both experiences.
Sharing How Authentic Writers Approach Writing

People who have been published professionally often do not share the first draft of what they have written, and often experience frustration, even a sense of failure. Writers are not exceptional people who always find writing easy, or who have extraordinarily interesting lives to write about. They are ordinary people, who bring to life the world around them with their words.

Fletcher (2006) suggests showing students examples of professional writers’ work, who have experienced failure, such as E.B. White, who did nine drafts of Charlotte’s web before it was published (p.37).

Modeling the writing process ourselves and sharing our own writing speaks volumes to students and encourages them to take risks. Buis (2007) recommends using a ‘write aloud’ as well as read-alouds to introduce students to the writing process, before they plan their writing. This is how she describes her experience with write alouds:

I remember thinking back to Frank Smith’s words for young teachers: “You can’t teach writing if you don’t write and write in front of your students.” He was so right. I can’t believe the difference it makes to their writing and their willingness to write to have them see me, as their teacher, struggling as a writer in front of them. At first, I wasn’t sure I would know what to do, but then I realized we all know enough about writing to be able to stand up while in front of our students. You don’t really need any special lesson plans, you just need the courage to write, to stand up, and live out your own writing process in front of them. It really helps if you talk to yourself about your writing, of course in front of them, too! Once you have risked doing it once, you are forever changed. You are changed when you know that you can make a serious impact on your reluctant writers. (p.14)

Working with Accessible Genres

Buis (2007) points out that there is a myth that personal narrative, poetry and memoirs can free reluctant writers and help us get to know them. Such genres require a certain amount of self-revelation, which some students may not be comfortable with, due to cultural, emotional or psychological reasons. It is therefore important to select a genre and a topic, which are accessible to all students. The use of some genres allows emergent writers ‘protective cover’ to explore expressing their thoughts in safe way (p.23). We need to consider student vulnerability when choosing which genre and topic to work with. Free verse poetry provides a good place to start for many students. In my field class, students created poetry bags – they chose a theme for their bag (e.g. hockey, make-up, gardening). The bags were created out of construction paper, and the students wrote poems about the items in the bag, with each item represented in construction paper. Similarly, the haiku, ING poem, and

The role of a writer is not to say what we all can say, but what we are unable to say.

Anais Nin
cinquain were used. Reading the students’ pieces, I was impressed by how eloquent they sounded; there was a sophistication in the composition of the poems, which the use of genre provided, which really made the students’ thoughts pop out on the page.

Working with genres requires the teacher to have a number of examples from professional and student writers, which the students can read and experience, to be able to fully understand the genre.

**Allowing Students to Have a Voice**

Fletcher (2006) surveyed nearly five hundred boys about writing, asking them to complete this sentence at the end of the survey: “When we write in school I wish we were allowed to...” The boys stated unequivocally that they wanted to:

- Create our own topic
- Choose
- Write whatever we want.

Allowing the students to have a voice is not just limited to them picking their own topic, but also extends to ‘how’ students are writing, not just to ‘what’ they are writing – this could include humour, illustrations, slang. Rather than letting our own bias rule what is acceptable or non-acceptable in students writing, we can involve students in conversations about what is permissible in writing and what is not – letting them have a voice. Fletcher suggests showing students well-written texts with a skillful use of violence in the narrative (such as Gary Paulson or Edgar Allan Poe).

**Creating a Safe Environment**

Even sharing the personal photographs of my writing at the end of this paper creates a sense of vulnerability in me – what will the instructor think when he see them? What will other people think if I show them in class? If I feel this way, how do students feel, who have much less exposure to being at the front of a classroom and sharing than I do?

The warm-up exercises we can do, before students start to write, speak to creating a sense of comfort in the class for students to brainstorm ideas, write and share. I think that think-pair-share exercises are critical to building trust before students are invited to share in the main group. Trying out ideas with one partner first gives students experience in expressing their ideas and reflections, and in receiving feedback.

Every student needs to encouraged to write and to take risks, and be acknowledged for doing so; we can acknowledge student success by showcasing examples of student work to the rest of the class, or by asking students to share during Writer’s Workshops, or by giving them feedback during student/teacher conferences. The emphasis needs to be placed on writing as a process, not a product. If the teacher emphasizes this through carefully thought out and intentionally placed anchor/mini-lessons, and
Within the web of relationships, students learn to trust themselves as learners, as actors in their classroom, and in the world.

Raider Roth (2005)
How Do We Balance Direct Teaching With The Writing Process?

As teachers, we can create systems to teach students spelling and writing conventions as outlined in the Program of Study, but we also need to let our students experience what it feels like to write, to be lost in the experience of writing, in what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi termed as being in the ‘flow zone’¹. To be in the flow zone, a student has to have a task before them which is neither too difficult, nor too easy, so that anxiety and boredom are not experienced. When a student finds themself in the flow zone, they become so engaged in their learning, that they lose track of time, as the distinction between work and play becomes blurred. Writing is a process, which, when interrupted, can lose its flow. Students need to be able to write ‘risk-free’ by putting down words, and not initially worrying about their correctness at the expense of self-expression. Wells and Reid (2004) suggest using writing dictionaries, word lists and word walls with caution, as they can become a crutch for reluctant writers, who will be distracted from the writing process by consulting these tools (p.13). Similarly, students may use the excuse for perfect penmanship as a means to avoid writing. Both penmanship and correct spelling and conventions are important, and the art of the teacher is to find the balance between setting high expectations and creating a risk-free environment for writing.

While contemplating what it means to allow students to experience flow, we need to remind ourselves that writing is a process, not merely an exercise in getting grammatically correct language down on paper. Challenging our own experience of school (where writing was most likely taught in a sequential, linear fashion, presenting one skill, which was ‘mastered’ before the next was introduced) is important if we are to create a ‘flow zone’ for our own students. We need to hold two key things in our awareness: 1) how writing is learned; 2) the value of the writing process students go through to create pieces of written work.

To take the first of those points, how writing is learned, we need to consider recent research on how emergent writers acquire written language. Weaver (2000) suggests that the traditional perspective of how to teach reading and writing usually emphasized comparing what children were able to do with what adults and mature readers and writers were able to do. There were four underlying assumptions to this perspective: reading and writing were difficult and unnatural to learn, children were considered to be knowledgeable about reading and writing only when their efforts approximated adults’ reading and writing; reading required readiness; and writing was learned after reading (p.31). Weaver states that three areas of research and theory led educators to reexamine these traditional assumptions about literacy learning, namely that: 1) some children learned to read and write without instruction; 2) some children learned to write before they learned to read; 3) reading and writing were reconsidered as language processes. These findings led to a new perspective on emergent literacy called the psychosociolinguistic perspective, which, as the name implies, is linked to cognitive, social and linguistic factors involved in learning to read and write. In this perspective, there are four areas of a child’s knowledge which teachers are encouraged to observe: meanings, forms, meaning-form links and functions; these areas are interconnected, with no one of these areas being more important than another. Children do not learn about these areas separately or in any particular order, but practice in these areas at the same time. In this perspective, children will use many different ways to begin to represent meaning, such as drawings, symbols, syllables and invented spellings to represent meanings. Children become aware of the function of written language to meet their needs, whether those needs are social, to receive and give information, to express themselves, to explore, increase their knowledge and record information.

Secondly, writing is a process, and valuing this process means placing emphasis on the whole process, not just the final product. Wells and Reid (2004) define the writing process as follows (p.10):

1. Before students write (warm up exercises)
2. Planning the writing
3. Drafting
4. Peer conference
5. Teacher conference
6. Publishing.

The concept of the ‘Writer’s Workshop’ involves all of these stages, and is a good starting point for us to explore how to engage reluctant writers through effective teaching strategies.
How Can We Teach Writing Skills To Reluctant Writers?

Adapted from Wells and Reid (2004), p.10

How Can We Teach Writing Skills To Reluctant Writers?

- The making of good copy
- Enhanced by illustration
- Shared as a reading to an audience

Warm up the writers with rich experiences
- Read alouds
- Partner talk
- Anchor/Mini-lessons

Encourage tools for shaping writing:
- Webs
- Lists
- Drawings
- Notes

The Writing Process

Before Students Write

Planning the Writing

Drafting

Peer Conference

Teacher Conference

Publishing

Focus on ideas and language
- Apply conventions (spellings, punctuations, legibility)
- A usually silent process
- Self-editing and revising with an eraser

- Reading to a friend
- Adding or taking away
- Fixing the meaning
- Fixing the spelling and punctuation

- Response
- Further revision and editing
- Reflection on the process
- Setting of goals

- Reading to a friend
- Partner talk
- Anchor/Mini-lessons

- Read alouds
- Shared as a reading to an audience

Motivating Reluctant Creative Writers
Rebecca Mitchell, Inquiry Paper, April 2011
Pre-Writing Activities

In thinking about the writing process cycle, I am aware that I have only seen parts of it used in practice, rather than seeing each element of it used as part of the creation process. When I think about the reluctant writers in my field class, I feel that they would greatly benefit from experiencing the first part of the cycle, which encompasses pre-writing activities, and community building. Warm-up activities create a shared experience, a sense of excitement and anticipation, and set the tone in terms of the expectations the teacher has of students.

Many of the pre-writing activities suggested in literature remind me of the community-building activities for the non-violence program for youth I used to run. They not only help students with their writing, but also enable them to get to know about each other’s interests, life experiences, strengths and fears. By building community with one another, a greater trust is created amongst students, which increases their likelihood to take risks in writing, and in sharing their writing with their peers.

Examples of Strategies:

Brainstorming and discussing ideas
This can be done in a think-pair-share with a partner, or with the teacher.

Picture prompts
Many teachers do not allow students to draw unless they have finished the writing part of a task. However, some students, like the reluctant writers in my field class, are kinesthetic and visual learners, who benefit from ‘doing’ or ‘seeing’. Movies or pictures, or personal art can all act as a stimulus to the creative writing process.

Researching the subject
Finding out more about a subject enables students to fill in gaps in their schematic knowledge, and develop a good context for the subject they are writing about, in terms of the history behind it, the sensory aspect etc.

Oral rehearsals - (Wells and Reid, 2004)
This can be done through partner talk, ‘knee to knee’ and ‘eye to eye’ with another student; one person is A and another is B. Students respond to the teacher’s directions to turn to and work with their partner. For example, the teacher can read a book to the students, and ask one partner to assume the role of the author and retell the story to their partner. Wells and Reid point out that these talks can help students develop a ‘writer’s voice’ (p.11).
Celebrating classroom writing from the previous day
The teacher carefully selects pieces of student writing from the previous day to share with students as a warm-up to writing. Students are invited to critique what makes these samples of writing so special, and what could be added or changed by the author to make the piece even more powerful.

Using discrepant events as a warm-up activity
This could take the form of a piece of art, a video, an object, or a hands-on activity for the students. Drama and movement could also be used to generate discussion and explore different layers of movement and perception. Collections provide a beautiful starting point for writing. In our practicum class, we experienced an art teacher working with us. We created a monoprint, and a reflection (below). The teacher brought a collection of heart-shaped stones, which students could choose from and base their work on.

Similarly, our lecturer shared with us an idea which his colleagues have used, of showing a collection of buttons on the Smartboard, or physically sharing a collection of real buttons. Each student selects a button, and thinks about who would wear that button – what type of clothing would it be on? Where would the person who was wearing that piece of clothing be? Whom would they be with? What kind of a person would they be? We were then asked to select a letter – A, B, C, or D, and were shown a slide of four different locations and asked to look at the one which corresponded with our letter – that was where the person with our button was. This was the basis of a story to be told.
**Visualizing**

In our field class we explored using soundscapes to encourage students to write. We experienced a visual image and the sounds of a rainforest. This took me back to thinking of Ryley, who wanted to write about an animal who lived in the rainforest, but was having difficulties describing the rainforest. We talked about smells, and sounds, and colours and texture, but I can’t help thinking how much more helpful using that image and sound would have been as a discrepant event. Harvey and Goudvis (2007) emphasize using all the senses, not just sight, to describe a scene as a writer. A strategy in modeling how to create compelling mental images is to take a piece of text, and label the nouns and the verbs in the text, and talk about how they create striking imagery (Harvey and Goudvis, p.137).

So often, in my field calls, students would describe a character’s surroundings in a story very literally. Visualization can also be about inference. This is one of my favourite quotes in relation to creative writing, which I think, along with appropriate images, would create a wonderful springboard for discussion.

---

**Don’t tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass.**

*Anton Chekhov*

---

**Thinking Like a Writer**

Modeling the writing process ourselves and sharing our own writing speaks volumes to students and encourages them to take risks. Think alouds are important if we are to show students how to write and why we choose certain words or turns of phrase over others. When we demonstrate this technique during our own writing demonstration in front of the students, they are able to see how we revise as we go along, and how many of our decisions are made quickly during the act of writing (Routman, 2005, p.48).

Questions Routman suggests asking ourselves in front of our students as we model the writing process are:

- How shall I begin?
- Should I say it this way, or that way?
- Would it sound better, if I change this word, this line?
- I’d better reread this to figure out what to say next
- Will my reader be pleased with the way I’m saying this?
• Does it make sense?
• Have I been too wordy, repeated myself, rambled?
• What can I leave out? What’s still missing that I need to add?

We can translate these questions into the following criteria for students (Routman, p.159):

• Precise language (such as lively verbs)
• Unnecessary words we can cut out
• Confused meaning
• Clear organization
• Places where you stumble
• Places where you get bored
• Places where it doesn’t sound right.

Where I feel students in my field class sometimes stumble, is in not being aware of who their audience is, and how they might receive their writing, particularly if there is a lot of retelling of event, and “he said’, “then this happened” type of narrative. In using the think aloud strategy, the students get to assume the role of an audience member, and experience how words and narrative are chosen for effect.

**Reading Like a Writer**

I was interested in Harvey and Goudvis’ way of promoting metacognition in students in relation to the meaning of text and how text is composed, and then working with students to integrate their increased awareness of the text into their own writing. They suggest a three-step process in exploring personalities from the past; first, the student responds to the text, noting down facts, and giving their response (p.191):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facts from the Text</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>e.g. Six million Jews were murdered</td>
<td>I wish there were no Nazis because it’s not fair that others couldn’t have food and homes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After the students have read and responded to the text, they explore one of the main characters:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic:</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subtopics:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why they are famous</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interests/Dreams</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Interesting Facts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Finally, the students write a biography of their personality from the past in the first person. Because they have studied the facts of their character’s life, responded to the facts, and explored different facets of their life, they are connected to how the character thinks and may have responded to certain situations, not just to what happened in their life. In my experience of working with reluctant writers, they can feel overwhelmed by the task, and not know where to start. This technique breaks down the task into sequential steps, to allow any student to discover how to add depth to a character.

Other written responses to writing could include: interviews with an author; letters to an author; reader’s theatre script; a book review (Routman 2005, p.125).

**Deepening Read Alouds**

Harvey and Goudvis (2007) carry the idea of read alouds further by having the students respond to a piece of writing which is read aloud, by analyzing the content, process and craft (p.196).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content (Facts)</th>
<th>Process (Thinking)</th>
<th>Craft (Writing)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Students start with analyzing text using the first two columns, and then move on to adding the third column. As well as noticing the reading process, and the content of a piece, the students become writing critics by reflecting on the effectiveness writing, and drawing in some of the techniques they notice into their own writing. Students begin to synthesize what is being read, taking note of the facts, observing their thinking process, and reflecting on the quality of the writing.

---

"Influential teachers engage students in the thoughtful exploration of text. The first step in that process is detecting significant underlying themes, or messages about the human condition, embedded in text. The second step is using those themes to develop questions that draw students into lively and engaging discussion." (p.232)

*Applegate and Applegate (2010)*
Helping Students Pick Appropriate Topics
Instead of spending time on debating the appropriateness of topics to write about, we can set criteria to help the students be successful in their choice of topic (Routman, 2005, p.178). Questions students can be asked to consider are:

- Is the subject important to you? Why do you care about it?
- Can you include some interesting details and facts?
- Can you think of a lot of good descriptive words for this subject?
- Can you describe the main character in this story? Who are they? Where do they live? What’s their story? What do they look like? What are their interests?

To reflect on their choice of writing topic, students can participate in a think-pair-share activity before writing. Here, they can discuss their intention for picking a certain topic, and also how they will relate the story to their audience; this could involve their choice of genre, and their word choice.

Developing Characters
In thinking about the reluctant writers in my field class, and about my son’s genre of writing, I consider the development of characters in writing to be key to assisting students to be successful writers of engaging, meaningful prose. I often observe students writing streams of narrative, which involve moving quickly from one event to another, without using rich vocabulary to explore a character or a scene. This is frequently the case if a student chooses a video game as a topic to write about. Children are conditioned to the fast action of video games and the constant change of scenes and events. In writing, they need to slow things down, and the focus of effective writing needs to be on the character rather than the plot.

In interesting fictional narratives, the character has a goal to achieve or a problem to solve (Jamison Rog & Kropp, 2004, p.71). To create meaningful stories, Jamison Rog & Kropp suggest starting with the character; a quick free write can be used, having the students use their knowledge of someone they have met to create their character. Alternatively, the authors suggest conducting a ‘character interview’.

Questions which students can use to interview can be:

1. What is one of your greatest strengths?
2. What is one of your weaknesses?
3. What things do you like to do?
4. What things really bug you?
5. What is one of the highlights of your life?
6. What is one of the saddest moments of your life? (p.73).

The authors also promote using the SWBS format to developing plot: Somebody/ Wanted/ But/ So...

I asked my son how to develop stories, and he instantly responded with the following format:
When a student has determined who the character is, what their character traits are, and what their flaws are, they will be more likely to complete Ben’s process successfully. Once students have decided on the characters and the plot, they can participate in a think-pair-share, telling their story out loud to see how it sounds. Jamison Rog & Kropp (2004, p.74) point out the benefits of this process, in that it allows students to formulate their ideas, and develop a working memory of their story.

The Planning Process, Ben, Grade 4

1) Draw yourself a comic strip layout, with six boxes
2) Put a title in the first box
3) Put the characters’ names in the second box
4) Put ‘where’ the plot is taking place in the third box
5) Put ‘what’ is going to happen in the fourth box - focus on a problem that the characters will experience.
6) In the fifth box, put how the main character will solve the problem.
7) In the last box, put the conclusion (how the story will end). This is usually a solution to the problem.

Anchor Lessons

Wells and Reid (2004) focus on the use of ‘anchor lessons’ in creative writing classes; this seems to be a great way to intentionally balance direct teaching with the need for students to experience being in the ‘flow zone’ for writing themselves. Anchor lessons are integrated into the teaching plan for the year, to cover the teaching of certain writing skills. The skill, or anchor, is introduced through pre-writing activities, teacher read/think-alouds, mini-lessons, and a variety of other methods. The teacher participates in all aspects of the anchor lesson, by coaching, monitoring, assessing progress, and giving feedback. The students keep track of the anchors they use by writing reflections, keeping cue cards, or using journals (p.5). One class that the authors worked with even developed special bookmarks to remind them of the skills they learned. In planning an anchor lesson, we need to think about:

Why we are teaching the lesson – what is the anchor for students’ writing? Write it out and get the students to put it down. Have students make posters of all the anchors after the lesson.

How we are going to do it?

1. The process of giving an anchor lesson is to include a related warm-up activity at the beginning
2. We can start the learning of a new skill by accessing what students already know, and what they wonder about.
3. We then need to provide a focus point for students’ learning.
4. We need to allow students to reflect on the skill presented, and to make connections. We can do this by having volunteers share ideas; conducting a group think out loud; or having students select their most powerful ideas related to the new skills.

Student Reflection

- What were your images?
- How did you come up with them?
- Share your thinking...
- What did you learn from this anchor lesson that you could use in your writing?

Evaluation

- To what extent were the students able to incorporate the learning into their writing?

The skills or anchors used are developed into criteria, which help students to focus their efforts. Wells and Reid refer to their rubrics as ‘writing profiles’, and the language of the areas assessed speak to the four dimensions they identify for good writing: Engagement with the Topic; Vividness and Language Use; Organization and Structure; and Conventions. If there is an anchor lesson associated with each piece of writing, the teacher can build in 8 – 12 of these lessons each year, increasing the complexity of the writing rubric as the academic year progresses.


- Narrowing the topic
- Writing a beginning that grabs the reader
- Adding visuals to enhance the meaning of the text
- Crafting an ending to bring closure
- Having the writing ‘sound like you’
- Thinking about what the reader want/needs to know
- Revising as you go along (as a result of rereading, rethinking, response).

Whole-Class Share

Routman (2005) recommends the whole class share as a way to motivate students. The teacher carefully chooses who will share, and announces to the students at the beginning of the writing workshop, what kind of writing she is looking for to share at the end of the workshop. A student who has modeled the skills of the anchor/mini lesson which preceded the writing is invited to share in front of the whole class. The teacher asks the class to start reading their work before the share time, to ensure that they can read what they have written if they are invited to share. The student reads out their work once, and the class listens for the overall meaning of the piece. The student then rereads their work, and this time the class
listens for the language which has been used, things that have been done well, any sources of confusion, and how the student has written for their intended audience. The teacher starts the session by pointing out what the student has done well, focusing on the content only. She then highlights points which the student could work on to strengthen their writing, and may reread the text to emphasize a point. The teacher tracks who has shared with the rest of the class. To enable all students to share, this process can be done by each student with a partner.

**Guided Writing**

Two or more students can try out the skill presented and modeled by the teacher in the anchor lesson, with the class looking on. Alternatively, the teacher can present and model the skill, and students can then work in groups to model the same skill and bring their contributions to the class. The teacher has the pen at the front of the class, and the class works to compose the text, with the help of scaffolded conversations from the teacher. This process is powerful as it enables the class to see what is possible when they work together, and raises the expectations for great writing.

**Incorporating Technology into Writing to Motivate Students**

Gabriel and Gabriel (*Power in Pictures;* The Reading Teacher, 2010) talk about the creation of an e-library, by taking pictures from around the school. Students use the pictures as part of the writing process, to assist them with planning, sequencing their ideas, elaborating on their ideas, and in the revision process. They create stories using KidPix, Powerpoint or Microsoft Word, and their stories are emailed home, posted on-line, and some are printed and bound into books. The authors explain their rationale for using pictures from the school community is to allow students to tap into their common experience and apply their schema of school when reading the text created by their peers; in this way, they can focus on writing and comprehending text, rather than struggling with gaps in understanding due to lack of schematic knowledge:

Gabriel and Gabriel also encourage the use of digital technology, which levels the playing field for students when they write, as the use of technology is now involved, not just the writing:

> *Labbo* (2004) agreed with the importance of integrating technology into literacy curriculum because “reading and writing on a computer screen is inherently different than reading and writing on paper” (p. 688). Reading and producing e-books levels the playing field, which was once uneven due to student diversity, by increasing exposure to technology for all students involved.

The authors also make the case for technology in writing, due to its assistance to students with recursive revision and on the spot editing. The picture prompts from the digital library allow students to go back and reorganize the sequence of events in their story, and think about how they might add to what they have already written. The authors cite Johnston (2005) who describes an authentic assessment in New Zealand, whereby students used e-books in their role as a pretend library selection committee; this task enabled them to use higher level thinking skills and show their knowledge of different genres of writing.
E-book writing assignments allow students to see themselves as real authors and to experience the motivation and engagement that comes from writing about things they care about at a level that is challenging without being frustrating. The possibility of formal publication and circulation adds to this motivation and connects young authors to real readers throughout the building.

**Using Drama to Motivate Writers**

Karen Cathers & Nancy Schniedewind (2008) talk about the use of drama to motivate students. Students are given the opportunity to act out stories of bias. The experience of acting out their stories gives the students a deeper well of thoughts to draw from when revising their writing. The author used a Writer’s Workshop to precede the acting piece of the writing process. In the Writer’s Workshop, students were asked to plan out their story using graphic organizers, and by asking for feedback from their peers, the teacher, and classroom volunteers. The author started this process as she had noticed, when speaking with students, the tendency of young writers to leave out details in their stories, which would have made their stories more interesting for the readers.

Although the article focuses on the topics of discrimination and bias, the process (as given below) would seem to be transferable to any topic:


1. **Writing:** Students write a discrimination and/or ally story.
2. **Introducing:** Teacher introduces the steps in the “Act It Out” process.
3. **Telling:** A student volunteers to tell her/his story to the class; students ask clarifying questions of the storyteller to get a fuller understanding; teacher asks reflective questions to raise student awareness of diversity issues.
4. **Acting:** The storyteller chooses students to act out each role in the story; students “Act It Out” for the class, storyteller and teacher.
5. **Processing:** The storyteller gives feedback on the dramatization and provides further detail as needed; teacher processes the dramatization—asks questions to help student reflect on the experience—related to both writing and diversity issues, acting again, if time permits. Usually the storyteller directs students to reenact the story with more detail, based on the feedback. The teacher again processes that dramatization.
6. **Rewriting:** The student further develops her/his story with detail based on the action and the discussion.
Planning

Some students enjoy creating graphic organizers, such as webs or Venn Diagrams to plot out the structure of their work. The Calgary Board of Education offers Inspiration software to students as a planning tool. From what I have read and observed, I still feel that reluctant writers are more likely to become ‘stuck’ at this stage if the warm-up activities have not been done with enough intentionality and enough depth. Again, peer conferencing or think-pair-share activities can be invaluable in building the student’s confidence at this stage, generating new ideas, and helping them think through the organization of their thoughts and the language they want to use.

Many students benefit at this stage from organizers presented by the teacher. I think of these as scaffolding tools for students, which help them understand how to think like a writer. One of my favourite tools is ‘The RAFTS Framework’ (Jamison Rog & Kropp, 2004, p.21). For this tool, students are provided with the following reminder for planning their work:

R – Role of the writer (who is telling the story?)
A – Audience (who is going to be reading this?)
F – Format (what form will the writing take – a letter, a diary, an essay, a story, a news report?)
T – Topic (what is the main theme or idea of the writing?)
S – Strong verb (what is the purpose of the writing: to entertain, to amuse, to inform, to invite, to persuade?)

To add an element of fun, and to model for those who are struggling, Jamison Rog and Kropp (p.22) provide a table filled with words to accompany the headings (my husband liked this one, as his picks were: Aliens talking to earthlings, bragging, to advertise a new product).

Similarly, in writing about a personal memory, students can be provided with an organizer to assist them with planning out their writing. Jamison Rog and Kropp suggest the following headings (p.53):

1. Topic
2. Opening sentence
3. Who?
4. First
5. Next
6. Finally
7. Closing.
Drafting & Editing
The second and third stages of the writer’s workshop evolve around drafting and editing.

Drafting
Before students reach this stage, there needs to have been good preparation done through in pre-writing stage to give students a solid understanding of how writers think and the process they go through to write. This understanding gives them permission to make mistakes. In drafting their work, the first priority is for students to get their writing down, rather than being overly concerned with the mechanics of their writing. Spelling and punctuation can be ‘fixed’ later. This is where I think the modeling of writing by the teacher can help. Many students in my field class are frustrated with the idea of not being able to revise as they go along, or of having copy which looks untidy, being used as they are to writing on a computer.

“Spelling ought to be seen within the context of the whole writing process (Bean & Bouffler, 1988; Sowers, 1988). When children are required to learn to spell words correctly before they learn to compose, it stifles the writing process. Instead, teachers need to learn to analyze students’ spelling development within their writing in order to understand what is developmentally possible to teach students next – without squelching the development of the entire writing process. Teachers need to gather information about each student as a speller in three areas: level of spelling development, knowledge of common spelling rules, and spelling strategies in drafting and editing.” (cited in Rhodes & Shankin 1993, p.286)

Jamison Rog and Kropp (2004) suggest having children write on every other line to assist with later revision, as well as writing in pen, to resist the urge to use an eraser. The fewer the distractions, the more likely the student is to enter Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s ‘flow zone’, where they are totally absorbed in their writing.
**Editing**

A definition of editing in relation to children’s writing is most often correcting the mechanics of the writing, rather than reformatting. For young writers, it is helpful to break the natural process of doing editing and revising down into two separate parts, to enable the student to give enough focus to both parts. (Jamison Rog & Kropp, 2004, p.17). Reading aloud helps the editing process, even reading backwards to pay attention to each word and how it is spelt.

We can assist students in the editing process by helping them to methodically check conventions and grammar; this can be done by providing lists, or by giving students a quick reminder and lesson as they move into the editing process. In my teaching practice, I would like to designate the last ten minutes of writing time to the editing process, so that students form the habit of checking their work and of relearning conventions and grammar on a regular basis. My experience to date has been that students will leave the editing process until after they have finished their piece of writing. While I acknowledge that many of them are in the flow of writing, it strikes me that the task of editing can become onerous and defeating for the reluctant writer if it is left in its entirety until the end of the writing process. I have seen students’ work at different schools, which is displayed on the wall, but is littered with errors, which detracts from the content of the work. If the teacher does not want to discourage the writer by littering his/her paper with correction marks, a way of avoiding correcting multiple errors is to make the editing process part of the writing lesson.

In order to assist students with the editing process, the teacher can employ some of the following strategies:

1. Polling the students about where they are going to start at the beginning of a writing workshop
2. A Chart that indicates where students are in the Authoring Cycle helps teachers determine which students need help immediately (Atwell, 1997)
3. A chart that students can keep themselves indicating “the status of my writing” – this encourages students to internalize parts of the writing process and set goals for moving through the Authoring Cycle. It provides a quick reference point for the teacher as to where the student is and what assistance they may need.

We can have students take more responsibility for revision and editing by requesting a conference with a peer. This can be done in a special corner of the room, with four pairs of students participating. Students can complete the following form before participating (Rhodes & Shankin 1993, p.282):
Motivating Reluctant Creative Writers
Rebecca Mitchell, Inquiry Paper, April 2011

Requesting a Peer Revising and Editing Conference

Before you confer, be sure to have thought about and checked off each of these points:

- Does all my information belong in this story or should some be crossed out?
- I have answered three or more of the questions asked of me in the Author’s Circle
- I have checked my conventions sheet for all the writing conventions that I am responsible for.

**During this peer revising and editing conference, I want to work on:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Spelling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>Capitals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ending</td>
<td>Sentence endings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A discussion can be conducted amongst students, or with the teacher at first modeling the process of giving feedback and making suggestions, to help students with the creation and editing process. Use the following form to keep consistent notes (created from Case reading, Rhodes & Shankin 1993):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author’s Name:</th>
<th>Author’s Circle Date:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title of the Piece:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I would like help with:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compliments from other students:</td>
<td>Questions from other students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestions from other students</td>
<td>Editing (grammar and conventions)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Authentic Audience**

During Language Arts at my field school, students created journals, picking books which were meaningful to them to write about. The teacher was their first audience, and responded to their writing, using questions to encourage them to go deeper into their reflection and analysis of the book. The students then created presentations on the books, as well as a special card which went with the book to the library, to recommend the book to other students. The students experienced having four authentic audiences here – the teacher, their peers, the librarian, and other students of the school, who saw their recommendation card in the library (see picture below). The presentations the students gave were filmed by their teacher and can now be used as artifacts for the CBE consultants who assist with the development of reading and comprehension strategies, as well as being posted on the class website for parents to see. This activity really animated the students and took their learning beyond being individual learning to group sharing, and community sharing. Having an authentic audience encouraged their reading, their writing, and their pride in their work. I think that too often, students’ audiences are limited to whoever chooses to look at their work when it is hanging in the doorway. Other, creative methods can be used to reach out beyond the classroom community, to allow the students to experience what it is like to write for someone other than their peers and their teacher.
How Do We Assess Writing?

Although this last section is devoted to assessment, ‘assessment’ is where I feel we need to start in order to teach with intentionality, before we set foot in the classroom. We need to know how we are going to layer writing skills into our lessons throughout the year. In the words of Regie Routman (2005):

Explicit instruction goes hand in hand with meaningful teaching and cannot be left to chance.  

(p.15)

Wells and Reid (2004) point out that creating assessment tools is a great place for teachers to start, who wish to deepen their understanding of what good writing is. The skills or anchors used are developed into criteria, which help students to focus their efforts. Wells and Reid refer to their rubrics as ‘writing profiles’, and the language of the areas assessed speak to the four dimensions they identify for good writing (p.30): Engagement with the Topic; Vividness and Language Use; Organization and Structure; and Conventions. With the exception of ‘Conventions’, the criteria under each category speak to the student’s voice and personality in expressing themselves, and to how clearly and strongly they are able to express themselves. I personally appreciated the language used in relation to the individuality of the writer and their ability to express themselves. For example, for effective writing, ‘Engagement with the Topic’ includes criteria of: the ideas being developed with relevant details, examples and explanations; the writer expressing a strong point of view, and possibly including personal feelings and opinions. For ‘Vividness and Language Use’, criteria include: writing which is highly individual and expressive of the writer; expression of energy for the topic; rich and vivid language to convey the writer’s own voice; experimentation with poetic devices such as metaphor and simile; the writer takes risks to use language and expression in original ways. Under ‘Organization and Structure’, we are told that effective writing begins with an ‘arresting lead’. The language of this rubric is alive, and is focused on the voice of the writer and the individuality and uniqueness of the way the writer expresses themself. The rubric itself gives the reader a good understanding of what deep, creative writing is, without sounding dry and uninteresting – it makes me want to write! In teaching anchor lessons around the specified criteria, a teacher can more easily evaluate a student’s progress, by seeing how they incorporate the skills taught, as well as the ideas and feedback of their peers, into their writing. The opportunity for the students to directly experience the skills presented in the anchor lesson, reflect on them, be coached on them, and evaluate the lesson, serves to anchor the writing skill in question in their memory.

Assessment in writing is not limited to the assessment of the final product, but to the whole process. The process could be evaluated by gathering pre and post test samples, or by collecting on-going assessment of students’ writing. On-going, formative assessment is a time-consuming process, and is one that should involve teachers, students and parents. This can be done by the use of personal journals, which both teachers and parents comment on. Other strategies include:
• Keeping anecdotal notes about conferring on a form in each child’s writing folder.
• Using a form which has each child’s name on it – recording dates and anecdotal information. This form becomes a quick way for the teacher to check if she has conferred with each student at least once every two weeks.
• Attaching post-it notes to a writing assessment sheet – one post-it note for each child.
• For lower grades, where there is less to observe on: divide a sheet into two, one side for a student: the top of the child’s column is devoted to writing and the bottom to reading. The writing section has five observational areas: topic selection, content, revision, participation in Author’s Circle, and ties between reading and writing.
**Conclusion**

As a result of writing this paper, my beliefs regarding reluctant writers have changed. I no longer have an underlying, unspoken judgment that students who do not want to write are unreachable, and a product of an information-driven age, which does not value the written word. Rather, I am inclined to continuously look at different teaching strategies which can engage students’ senses and speak to their interests. I am no longer quick to think of boys’ choices of writing topics as being inappropriate, but instead have developed an increased sense of confidence to work with them to create strong writing using those topics.

I am no longer afraid to write myself, and have started a journal (photos below), which I intend to share with my new field class next term. I have every intention to model the writing process in front of my students, sharing the process which we all go through in our struggle to write effectively for our audience.

In comparing the writing process to what I have seen take place in my field school, I am convinced that enabling students to be successful in producing good quality writing, with rich character development, interesting content, and expressive vocabulary, lies in the time devoted to the pre-writing time in class. Warm-up exercises, sharing with partners and with the whole group, seeing teacher demonstrations, participating in guided writing and anchor lessons are pivotal to encouraging students and scaffolding the writing tasks ahead of them. We cannot set expectations with meaning and a reasonable chance of attainment by all students, unless we intentionally teach to those standards, choosing the subject and the genre of our teaching with care, demonstrating it, showing examples of it to students, and guiding them in the practice of it. Teaching creative writing effectively and intentionally is not something which happens without preparation, and without integration into a larger whole.

‘Literature adds to reality, it does not simply describe it. It enriches the necessary competencies that daily life requires and provides; and in this respect, it irrigates the deserts that our lives have already become,’

(C.S. Lewis).
This is my first journal page. I’m scared to write down my thoughts, and I’m not sure if I will like this or not. But, lots of very smart people say that keeping a journal helps you reflect and grow.

Here is a picture of my head yesterday; I was scared as I thought about the new school that I will be teaching in next fall. What will the students be like? What will my partner teacher be like?

That picture was red, with a black hole in the middle. I wonder if that is a picture of fear. I wonder what my image of happiness and balance is.

So, I decided to focus my energy on a picture of happiness and balance. This is what I drew. What would happen if I put my thoughts here and not in the other place?

Purple is my favourite colour. Green is for growth, white and yellow are light and...
Bibliography


Feret, Alice J. EdD, Associate Professor of Reading, College of Education, East Carolina University, & Smith, Judith J. EdD, Assistant Professor of Elementary Education, College of Education, East Carolina University. Literacy and art: collage for pre-service teachers. InSight: A Journal of Scholarly Teaching, Volume 5, 2010, pp.53 – 53.


Routman, Regie. Writing Essentials; Raising Expectations and Results While Simplifying Teaching. Heineman. 2005. Portsmouth, NH.


