

**2009 NCTE Donald H. Graves Writing Award Essay**  
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Time, Opportunity, and A Lot of Nudging

A Reflective Essay

A few years ago Randolph came to me during class with a draft of his poem. He handed it to me with wrinkled brow and in a frustrated tone he said, "I just can't figure out what you want." I read his poem and handed it back to him. "Randolph," I said, "this class is not about what I want...this class is all about what you have to give." Randolph's body lifted and a smile spread to his cheeks and through his eyes. As he returned to his seat, I could hear him say, "Oh – O.K. – Cool!" Now I tell students this story as each year begins in hopes that it will relax shoulders and clear minds...I have learned that good writing comes from students who are not worrying about what their teacher wants. In my writing class only my writing is about what I want...student writing is about what each one has to give!

I believe that each of us is a unique human being – a mixture of intelligence, experiences, and all that we have acquired from our family history. These elements form our tacit knowledge – our unique way of expressing how we see the world. When students know they are free of topic restraints, their writing becomes who they are now, allowing freedom to figure out who they will become.

I teach writing in a workshop atmosphere because I can reach every student no matter what level of writing skills they possess as they enter my classroom in the fall of the year. Writing skills cannot be forced on students, they must be developed. In order to develop writing skills, students must begin at their own level and progress from there. Writers' Workshop is that academic opportunity to leave no child behind by building individual skills daily.

The way I teach writing to sixth graders is directly influenced by the writing experiences they bring with them to my classroom, and students come to me with minimal writing experiences. I begin by creating writing as a habit. As the year progresses, we build writing skills through writing and reading and listening. Specifically, my beliefs about the development of writing integrate the following

teaching goals. It is from these instructional goals that I evaluate growth in student writing ...

- ▶ **Building writing fluency** - We build writing fluency with lots and lots of journal writing. Famous authors tell us that they write everyday. It is what helps to make their writing what we want to read. In our classroom I reserve chunks of time to think and write because I know that thinking is a big part of writing, and both thinking and writing take time.

Many students just simply do not know what to write about. To entice student writing I begin our year with the big word – LOOK. We look at our world...we wonder...we describe. We look out of windows, we sit outside, we people watch from our cars, we notice our cats, our dogs, our hamsters. We write small...lots and lots about one little thing. We create a monocular by curling our hand and focusing in on something interesting to write about. Everyone can LOOK and find something of interest. Some students describe with details, while others just tell what they saw...it is a beginning for everyone.

- ▶ **Developing clear writing** - We work to develop clear, understandable, written ideas. Good clear writing creates pictures and movies in the reader's mind...and it is enhanced by writing itself – writing volumes on a regular basis. I require journal writing. I never read what students write in their journals, but I instead count the number of pages of written ideas and grade based on volume. This is their place to work things out. This is their place to develop fluency, to get rid of the “junk”, to write about what is on their mind. It is also a place to record, and to remember...and it is a place to begin drafts of pieces they may want to bring to final publication. I estimate that 90% of final draft pieces, written throughout the year, originated in journal writing.

Clear writing is also developed through reading and listening to a variety of authors. In addition to writing in their journals, students read one novel of their own choosing every 3 weeks during the school year. A variety of written reader responses are assigned and graded at the end of

each novel. I also read novels and picture books to students so they can hear how authors use literary elements and vocabulary. I also write and share my own writing, good and bad, with my students. This helps them know that writing takes repeated effort in order to create a piece worthy of being read.

- ▶ **Building vocabulary** - We build vocabulary from reading and listening, and from our life experiences. In natural course, the accumulated vocabulary shows up in students' writing. We keep a visual record of vocabulary on our Word Wall and lists of categorized words in chart form on our bulletin boards. We keep lists of strong verbs, instead of said words, cool words and phrases, and other categories as they arise. I have created a variety of vocabulary bookmarks for students to fill in as they read their novels. They are encouraged to add vocabulary from their novels to our class lists.
- ▶ **Building proper language usage** - We listen to the music of our language because by listening we can hear how our language ought to be used and in turn write from what we hear. I specifically teach standard language usage and punctuation as it is needed in student writing. I base my teaching on the constructivist views of the Russian philosopher Vygotsky. We as humans build and create our own body of knowledge. New concepts must be taught in context so that they become a useful part of our knowledge base, otherwise they will dangle somewhere outside of us and be gone after we take our test on Friday. Teachers must relate new concepts to students in relevant situations so new knowledge will attach and build on what is already known and useful.

I teach rules for using commas early since students use commas to divide ideas in their poetry at the beginning of the year. Punctuating conversation instruction comes later in the year as students include conversation in dramatic scenes and memoirs. Individualized instruction for any grammar or punctuation skill comes at any moment in what I call "teachable moments." As I conference with a student I will stop and say,

“This is a teachable moment,” and then teach what is needed in order to fix their writing.

- ▶ **Sharing ideas and sharing writing** - We frequently share our writing. Sharing writing can be a scary experience. I have had many students refuse to read what they have written. From my students' feelings and my empathetic feelings, I have learned that if I share some of my bad writing first, students are more willing to share their writing. They are instructed to comment on the positive and negative aspects they find in my writing. They are further encouraged to suggest positive changes. I know the value of sharing writing, so I create a safe environment where students learn that sharing is helpful and necessary to improve writing.

In our workshop, a chunk of time is devoted to discussing our life experiences because it is through talk that we generate ideas. Always, when we sit on our rug to share, we have a pencil and our journal ready to record whatever might pop in our heads as a writing idea.

- ▶ **Portfolios** - It is important for students to know that their writing has purpose. In addition to publishing opportunities, my students collect their fully edited writing in a portfolio. At the end of the year I spiral bind their collection of writing into a book for them to take home. Included in the book is a letter from me and their reading record for the year. In years to come students can look back, reread their 6<sup>th</sup> grade writing, and recall all of the novels they read. The portfolios are special places for students. I carry a picture in my head of students who sneak to our portfolio cabinet. I watch from across the room as they sit on a stool and gaze through their writing. They run their hand across each page as they reread it and then flip to the next piece...they display deep ownership in the ideas they created.
- ▶ **Building technology skills** - Our workshop includes development of technology skills. Students type and edit their written pieces on computers. They can print their written pieces in color or black and white,

and they save their work, in their own, password protected folder, on our school's server for future reference.

- ▶ **Non-fiction writing** - Our workshop also includes non-fiction studies. Students research and write author studies so they see authors as people and can contemplate their own future as an author. We also take time to study the community we live in. Students research and write about the history and geography of the place they call home.
- ▶ **Connecting to Malawi** – In July of 2004, I traveled with a group of area teachers to Malawi, Africa and worked for a month with Gift Kawiza, a 7<sup>th</sup> grade African teacher. In October of 2004, Gift came to my classroom to teach my students all sorts of Malawian traditions. As a result, integrated into my curriculum today is a study of Malawian culture and the writing of pen pal letters to Gift's students. Through the years, many of my students have stayed in regular communication with their Malawian friends. I am excited about the day when one of my former students travels to Malawi to meet their pen pal.

### **A brief look at my teaching of writing...**

I layer and add on skills and techniques as the days of the year pass. I begin with journal writing which is an assignment for the entire year. Early in the year I teach Georgia Heard's lesson on creating "White Spaces," helping students develop poetry from entries they have written in their journal. Embedded in these first months is the sharing of journal entries. Students must grow to believe that their ideas are valuable and that sharing helps expand their ideas and grow as writers.

In December, I teach Ralph Fletcher's "Explode a Moment." This idea encourages writing small...writing lots and lots of ideas and details about an observation, or an idea they have, or a short event they have experienced. I encourage students to try exploded moments in their journal and to bring at least one of them to final draft for inclusion in their portfolio.

At the first of the year, I teach Tom Romono's "Narrative Summary vs. Dramatic Scene." This skill layers on to the exploded moment and takes student

writing from merely telling, to immersing the reader into a story or situation. I require students to write, tweak, and edit a dramatic scene from their life.

In April and May I introduce Nancie Atwell's memoir. This is our longest piece of the year. Students choose a story from their life and apply the skills of exploded moments and dramatic scenes within their memoir. Many times I do not know what their topics are until they have drafted their piece and bring it to a read aloud session...and that is when my goose bumps begin. I am always amazed at the stories students have chosen to tell. The memoir must be typed in Times Roman or Arial size 12 font and be more than a page in length. Lots of moaning and groaning is heard when students hear about the font requirements. Amazingly, everyone eventually meets the requirements.

Along the way, throughout the year, we talk about the many uses for writing:

- Writing because we need to...
- Writing because we want to...
- Writing because we have to...
- Writing because we want to figure something out...

Our discussions get crazy and wild, and often head in the most unlikely directions, but one thing is for sure, we make memories...they for me and me for them, and everyone takes new skills and ideas with them.

Writing fascinates me in so many ways. For me, at times, it is a physical release and a wonderful emotional release. It works better than the most skillful psychiatrist. When issues arise in my life, I write. At first my pen flies across the page. As I work through the situation my pen slows down and finally comes to a halt. My mind is clear, my body relaxed, and I can go on with my day. I share this use of writing with my students and many of them come to realize it too, as our school year goes on.

### **How I view growth in writing...**

This past year I taught reading and writing to 114, 11 and 12 year old students. As I was contemplating the students who would best exemplify my teaching of writing, I considered writing growth in these areas:

- Fluency – does writing improve with more writing?
- Use of vocabulary
- Use of descriptive words and phrases
- Writing small – lots and lots of description about an idea, an event or something they saw. Does the student take us there so we can relive through their words?
- Clearness of ideas – does writing include good, understandable order of ideas?

I don't often step back and study individual student writing as it has progressed through the year, under my influence. I evaluate many individual pieces as they are written. I notice usage of words and phrases, structure of sentences, paragraphs, and whole pieces as they become more complex and purposeful throughout the year, but this process of evaluating student writing for the length of the year has indeed been enlightening.

Now meet my students...