Discovering Digital Differentiation:  
A Teacher Reimagines Writing Workshop in the Digital Age

M aria  SECOY ■ H ALEY W. SIGLER

Introduction

“Do you want to hear my story?” I am sitting at a table at the rear of the classroom, but it quickly becomes clear that I’m not simply an observer. I’ll be serving as a participant in this workshop. Students are bubbling with energy about their latest work and expect my feedback and response. This is a classroom where all the conventional elements of writing instruction are solidly in place. There are mini-lessons with clear objectives, student energy around drafting and editing, a teacher, purposeful in her mission, conferring with students, and a space for sharing and response. All of these elements, known since the work of Graves’ process approach to writing, are here. Yet, Maria has found a way to make writer’s workshop uniquely her own.

Haley Sigler, an education professor, transcribed this vignette after the first visit to the middle-school writer’s workshop of Maria Secoy, a sixth and seventh grade English teacher in rural Bath County, Virginia. Sigler and Secoy, coauthors of this article, initially met when, after one year of teaching middle grades, Secoy sought professional development in the teaching of writing. Like many K–12 teachers, Secoy had not received specific instruction on the teaching of writing in her licensure program (Myers et al., 2016). Secoy found the professional development she had been seeking when she joined Sigler’s existing group of teachers who met regularly to study the teaching of writing in their own classrooms. Secoy and a colleague traveled an hour every other week from their rural community to join the group of teachers dedicated to studying writing in their classrooms. This group met, and still meets, to explore how the work of Donald Graves, Lucy Calkins, Nancy Atwell, Ralph Fletcher, and others can be implemented in their own classrooms to study student writing and to reflect on their own teaching.

Upon joining the group, Secoy immediately embraced and implemented the nonnegotiable fundamentals of writing workshop including student choice, lots of time to write, and opportunity for response (Atwell, 2014; Calkins, 1994; Graves, 1983). She quickly noticed the quality of student writing in her classroom vastly increased. She was sold on writing workshop. Secoy, however, continued to struggle with questions of implementation including: How can a teacher offer mini-lessons that meet the needs of a wide-range of student writers? How can a middle school teacher confer with all students on a regular schedule? How can a teacher provide specific and useful feedback given the increased number of pages students compose in writer’s workshop?

Secoy found herself considering these questions while simultaneously navigating the unchartered waters of school-wide 1:1 technology integration. Her research and the support of Sigler’s research team led to Secoy developing systems and procedures that changed very little about the culture of her writer’s workshop, but everything about students’ growth as writers. In the end, her philosophy of writer’s workshop remained the same, but the classroom environment and mode of lesson delivery and feedback vastly shifted.

Components of Digital Writer’s Workshop

This article explores three specific practices implemented in Maria Secoy’s sixth and seventh grade middle school writer’s workshop classrooms. She uses free, web-
based technologies to help streamline the workflow for both herself and her student writers. Modern iterations of traditional practices, these elements of a digital writer’s workshop expand possibilities for teaching, writing, and response beyond the paper-and-pencil model. Table 1 outlines specific elements of a traditional writing workshop and compares how those nonnegotiable elements are implemented in Secoy’s digital writing workshop.

**Mini-Lessons**

Research supports what Secoy understands about her students, they learn best when they receive direct, explicit instruction from her about writing (De La Paz & Graham, 2002). This understanding is particularly relevant when choosing specific mini-lessons to meet individual students’ needs as writers. We have long known that students learn the most when working within their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Secoy has found that asking students to sit through a mini-lesson focused on skills they already have or providing instruction too far beyond their current writing skills is ineffective. While following the traditional writing workshop model, Secoy focused on meeting the needs of the average student, but she worried about the students who weren’t being served by a one-size-fits-all mini-lesson. After bringing these concerns to

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**Table 1. Traditional writing workshop v. digital writing workshop**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Traditional Writing Workshop</th>
<th>Digital Writing Workshop</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mini-Lesson</strong></td>
<td>Mentor text</td>
<td>Mentor text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher demonstration</td>
<td>Teacher demonstration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Explicit instruction</td>
<td>Explicit instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10-15 minutes</td>
<td>4-8 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Whole class</td>
<td>Students watch solo or in pairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>One-time lesson</td>
<td>Re-watchable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Delivered on teacher’s schedule</td>
<td>Students watch when they are ready</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Writing/Conferring Time</strong></td>
<td>Student explains goals</td>
<td>Student explains goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher &amp; Student evaluate application of mini-lessons</td>
<td>Teacher &amp; Student evaluate application of mini-lessons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Differentiated mini-lesson</td>
<td>Differentiated video lesson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Delivered in person by teacher</td>
<td>o Prepped &amp; includes mentor text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Applicable to specific writing</td>
<td>o Available to any/all students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5-10 minutes</td>
<td>3-6 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sharing</strong></td>
<td>Read aloud or projected</td>
<td>Excerpts posted online</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Often long or hard to understand</td>
<td>Written feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Limited “think time” for response</td>
<td>Feedback can be revised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Verbal feedback</td>
<td>Lasting record of feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Limited class engagement</td>
<td>Responding to others is required for all</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Professor Davis’s professional development group, she decided to experiment with creating videos of common mini-lessons she used in her writing instruction.

The use of free screen capturing video software, Screencast-O-Matic, which records both her face (via webcam) and her computer screen allows Secoy to prepare a range of mini-lessons to meet the diverse needs of learners in her classroom. Her lessons still follow the traditional architecture of a mini-lesson outlined by Lucy Calkins (1994). They begin with a published mentor text. Secoy then uses her own writing to model thinking and revision, bringing the specific writing craft lesson into her writing. Each lesson ends with suggestions for specific opportunities she commonly sees where students can apply the lesson to their own writing.

Secoy has built a library of mini-lessons, posted on Google Drive and accessible to her students. This allows her to examine student work and direct students toward specific mini-lessons that meet their needs in the moment. A sample mini-lesson can be accessed at https://wlu.box.com/v/sampledigitalminilesson. In this sample mini-lesson, focused on incorporating anecdotal stories in persuasive writing, Secoy uses her own writing to model the specific writing craft lesson. Students will have previously received copies of Secoy’s writing that serves as mentor text throughout the persuasive writing unit. Figure 1 shows a sample of these lessons as they are posted to Google Drive.

Since Secoy has completed the heavy lifting of creating a library of the most frequently needed mini-lessons, this allows her to abandon a deficit model and use a growth-mindset readiness lens when reading student work and conferring with students. Secoy and her students are able to choose the exact mini-lesson that would be most useful in the moment (Dweck, 2006). For example, Figure 2 shows an average example of student writing in Secoy’s classroom.

Secoy realizes Student A is ready for a mini-lesson focusing on how to add paragraphs to their dialogue. In the past, Secoy would deliver that lesson in a whole-class mini-lesson. However, when examining Student B’s sample writing (Figure 3), it is clear that that student already knows how to create paragraphs while writing dialogue.

Figure 1. Mini-lesson library on Google Drive
Student B is ready to examine dialogue tags in their writing. Secoy is able to use a different video mini-lesson to challenge this student to add variety to their writing by changing commonly used words, in this case “says.” Meanwhile, Student C (Figure 4), who is not ready to paragraph dialogue, is able to watch Secoy’s video lesson focusing on showing vs. telling. This writer needs to first learn that the use of dialogue is one way to develop a clearer visual for the reader. Through this lesson, Student C is able to revise their writing to include dialogue before being asked to demonstrate their ability to paragraph and punctuate dialogue.

Using this differentiated, digital mini-lesson format, Secoy’s students still receive direct, explicit instruction from their teacher. Now, however, that instruction is specifically differentiated to align with the students’ immediate needs as writers.

In an effort to align her reading and writing instruction, Secoy organizes these mini-lessons into writing units that align with her reading curriculum units: nonfiction, research, fiction, and poetry. While many lessons are used throughout several units, students are asked to focus on a select group of just three to six core focus lessons for evaluation for each unit. This allows Secoy to evaluate skills-based competencies in writing rather than evaluating final products. For example, Figure 5 shows Secoy’s lessons for evaluation during her fiction writing unit. You will notice lessons with mastery expected for all students, lessons that all students are expected to attempt, and lessons specifically developed for low-level and advanced writers.

While analyzing her end-of-year student surveys, Secoy noticed a majority of students cited the shift to video mini-lessons as helpful. Student feedback revealed the lessons empowered students to pace themselves and gave them the confidence to consistently and more independently move forward. One student commented, “I liked the videos because you’re able to go back and look over things without having to stop the teacher [and have her] repeat what was said.” Secoy made this same observation in her classroom. Her workshop progressed more smoothly, her instruction was more effective, and students were all increasingly engaged with writing.
Writing Conferences

Moving writing workshop into the digital age did not inherently change Secoy’s writing conferences. Secoy has found there is no digital replacement for the relationships forged through these student-teacher conversations. These interactions are vital to learning where students are as writers, what they need next, where their interests lie, and what goals they hope to achieve.

Secoy faithfully follows Lucy Calkins’s architecture of a writing conference (Calkins, 1994). While conferring with students, Secoy begins by researching what the student is working on, deciding to accept or alter the student’s plans. This is usually when she links the lessons she knows the student has viewed with their writing and makes recommendations about what and when to share with the class. She then moves into the teaching portion of the conference. Now, instead of having to reteach or refer to a whole-group mini-lesson, Secoy is able to make the connection by pointing to a specific point in the student writing and simply saying, “I think this would be a great place to use [a specific] mini-lesson. You can watch [or rewatch] that lesson and I’ll come back later to see how it’s going.”

From there, Secoy moves on to the next writer. When she returns to the student, they have a brief conversation confirming, clarifying, or adapting the way the writer has started incorporating the lesson into their work. This small change allows conferences to move quickly and more effectively.

Figure 6 shows the typical writing and conferring block during Secoy’s digital writers workshop. Students can be seen conferring with the teacher, applying mini-lessons, drafting, and viewing mini-lessons.
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In her 1:1 computing classroom, Secoy uses an Edmodo virtual classroom to facilitate opportunities for students to solicit and offer feedback to peers. She uses those specific mini-lessons aligned with her reading/writing units to create message-board spaces for students to self-evaluate. When writers decide they have mastered a specific mini-lesson and are ready for peer feedback, Secoy asks them to choose a part of the text that illustrates their understanding of that specific craft lesson. Students then select fifty to one hundred words that demonstrate their best writing within a specific skill. Students post that excerpt within the appropriate message board for other students and the teacher to see. Students are expected to respond to each other’s posts with specific, productive feedback. Figures 7 and 8 show examples of these exchanges about mini-lessons on flashback and physical character description.

The biggest change Secoy noticed when implementing this shift in environment for peer feedback was an increase in the quality of responses. By providing a written response in an online forum, students have time to consider their responses more thoroughly. The everlasting written record also provides the opportunity to revisit student responses and easily request clarification or elaboration when necessary.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Secoy has managed to retain the integrity of a traditional writing workshop while still moving key components into a digital space, allowing for increased differentiation through a library of video mini-lessons. Students now seek written responses from peers in a digital platform, allowing for more thinking time and providing a record of responses. Most importantly, relationships are maintained because mini-lessons are developed and delivered by a teacher who knows the students and confers with them regularly. In the end, teachers of writing should be encouraged that the fundamentals of writing workshop hold up in the digital world. These methods, effective in a rural classroom in

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In this digital rethinking of the traditional weekly writer’s logs, students analyze example writer’s blog entries then begin the habit of writing their own weekly entries, which focus on the writing that they have done over the previous seven days. These reflective assignments ask students to think about their progress with writing activities and to project how they will continue their work in the future, while communicating with classmates about the same.

Lisa Storm Fink
www.ReadWriteThink.org
http://bit.ly/1BPUt5i
Bath County, Virginia, can be easily adapted and implemented in various classroom environments to streamline workshop components to meet student needs.

In the end, just as Sigler witnessed in her visit to Secoy’s classroom, a technology-infused writer’s workshop empowers students to thrive while providing teachers time and space to support students using all the traditional elements of writing workshop. As teachers in writing classrooms continue to imagine the future of their writing instruction, the possibility of improvements through digital modifications are endless, as long as we do not move away from the fundamentals of quality writing instruction held true since Graves’ process approach to writing.

Maria Secoy is a sixth and seventh grade language arts and science teacher in rural Virginia.

Haley Sigler is associate professor of education and Director of Teacher Education at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia.

**REFERENCES**


