

UNITS OF STUDY IN THE WRITING WORKSHOP

In writing workshops across the world, teachers are struggling with the repetitiveness of teaching the writing process. On their walls, they have charts that show the steps of the process in linear or circular shapes. They march their students progressively through these steps, time and time again, like a machine. Faced with the quandary, "What am I to teach?" in the seemingly endless cycle, they reluctantly answer, "I guess I teach how to do each of these steps better one more time or teach random mini-lessons on whatever comes up on a given day." As a study group, we wanted a better answer than that to this curriculum question, and so we searched together for an organizing structure for our writing workshops. We wanted to plan units of study that would carry us across the year with our students.

A unit of study in writing is not unlike a unit of study in science or social studies. It is a line of inquiry—a road of curriculum, a trail of teaching, an excursion of knowing something about writing. It is some big thing that you and your class are digging into over time. For several weeks you plan mini-lessons and lines of inquiry that allow your students to become actively involved in creating the curriculum around the unit of study. If some outside force is requiring you to study something—say, "personal narrative" for the fourth-grade writing test—you turn that requirement into a unit of study on memoir that actively involves students as real writers engaged in inquiry.

Planning the Year

School years are made of time, and so when we started we looked for ways we might wrap these inquiries around the approximately 180 days of our school year. We imagined the school calendar in increments of time, each lasting approximately three to eight weeks. Next, we had to think about what we might study. As we thought about our teaching and our experiences in writing workshop, we decided there were many possibilities for studies that might help our students grow as writers. We generated the following list of possibilities for units of study:

- genre studies: fiction, memoir, poetry, essay, etc.
- the writing process itself, from idea to publication
- individual parts of the process, such as revision, editing, or gathering in the writing notebook
- living the writerly life
- collaboration (writing in partnerships and other groupings)
- a particular author
- the craft of writing: genre, structure, sound, language system
- difficulty—what are students struggling with?
- using a writer's notebook throughout the process
- stamina in the writing workshop (helping students develop muscles to make writing better)

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Teachers must decide how much they want to say to prepare their students.

This list helped us envision what a whole year's worth of study might include. Each of us began the process of making important curricular decisions about what units we would include in our planning for the year and where we would place these units on the timeline of our study.

We first considered units of genre studies. The focus of a genre study is on a particular type of writing and its attributes. We began with genre study because it was what we thought we knew (though we would find out we had a lot to learn as we went along). Genre studies seemed available. We had read about them in our mentor books on the teaching of writing by Randy Bomer (1995), Jo Ann Hindley (1996), and Lucy Calkins (1994), who wrote, "We regard genre studies as fundamental enough to shape our curriculum around them. We find that when an entire class inquires into a genre, it is life-giving" (p. 363). We remembered writing poems and stories as children, and, as avid readers, we knew lots of texts in different genres. So genre studies seemed a logical place to start and they seemed like units of study that could sustain us for much of the year.

Organizing for Genre Study

We learned through experience that regardless of the type of genre study we were having, the organization of the study was very similar. We organized a study of poetry in much the same way as we organized a study of fiction. The content was different, but the structure of the study was basically the same, as shown in the following structural frame for a genre study.

Genre Study Steps

Best-Guess Gathering

Immersion

Sifting

Second Immersion

Selecting Touchstone Texts

Touchstone Try-Its

Writing

Reflecting/Assessing

Best-Guess Gathering

When I get an image of what best-guess gathering looks like in a classroom, I am reminded of the treasure hunts that I participated in at the Brooklyn Museum as a child. I remember getting a clipboard and a short yellow pencil and then being let loose to find a list of treasures. I remember some children lagging behind because the clues on the clipboard didn't seem to be enough, and sometimes the instructors would say more about each clue before they sent us off. But most times it was just us and the clues. It wasn't like the instructors thought the clues were really all we had to go on. They knew we knew more. We were museum students. We were junior members of the museum and were expected to know something about it. Our monthly treasure hunts gave us a sense of ownership, a sense of "this is our museum." When I found the treasure—the museum was mine.

In best-guess gathering, the teacher and the students go into their world on a treasure hunt and bring to the classroom what they think are examples of the genre. Teachers must decide how much they want to say to prepare their students for the hunt. Many teachers do not define the genre at all, choosing instead to allow the definition of the genre to emerge from the gathered texts. They trust that students have in their minds an image of the genre and they want them to use this image to truly make a best guess. Other teachers might choose to say more—to give their students an image of the genre before they go out to gather. In the three genre studies in this issue, you will notice how each teacher makes this decision in her own way.

While most teachers invite their students in on the gathering, this part of the

study can be as individual as a single teacher and an evening in the library. It can also be as large as announcements over the loudspeaker to an entire school population: “Class 2-499 is studying poetry. Please help them with their study by placing your favorite poem in the envelope outside their classroom door!” No matter how teachers choose to approach this step, they should wind up with a huge pile of “stuff”—of best-guess genre examples—that have been gathered.

Immersion

As the material comes into the room, the teacher and students are reading it together, immersing themselves in all their best-guess “stuff.” As they choose interesting examples to read, they are beginning to pay attention to the sound and look of the genre and noticing the writing they admire. They are sorting the stuff into piles—categorizing in ways that help them define the genre. I have often asked students at this stage of a genre study to put things in piles that help them say smart things about the genre. I have to trust them to do this. I have to trust that everything they say is important and will somehow push the learning forward.

Around all the sorting and reading there must be a lot of talking. The students will use their talk to create a working definition of the genre as they notice generalities across examples. They will also notice so much more than they would if the definition of the genre had been handed to them in the beginning.

Sifting

After students have had time (three to four days) to look closely at the pieces of writing, they are ready to begin sifting. This is a process of selecting specific texts that will carry the genre study forward. We usually sift texts out for three reasons:

1. The text is not an example of the genre.

2. The text is an example of the genre, but it is not like what we will write. Because of such variety within genres, we must make a decision about what kinds of texts we will write. We keep only these kinds in our sifting.
3. The text belongs to the genre, and it is like what we will write, but it just isn't good writing. We just don't like it so we take it out. This is also when I'd remove anything that might not be appropriate content for the class to use as a model.

As you are sifting, remember that the world of literature is large. There is no reason for a single piece of literature that is not the best to be included in the study.

Second Immersion

Again the students need to immerse themselves in the genre, but this time they are looking at pieces that are exactly like the kind of writing they will be doing. This immersion has so much to do with the ears, with getting the sound of the genre inside the students. It is when students begin to look at the details of the pieces of writing. The beautiful beginnings and endings. The pictures that make you want to cry. During this immersion the teacher is looking for a touchstone text for the class, and the students are looking for mentor pieces for themselves. How do they know when they find them? When a piece seems to jump out of someone's small pile and literally scream his or her name followed by the names of all the students in the class, then that student or teacher has selected a touchstone text (see Figure 1).

Touchstone Try-Its

The touchstone text for the class is made available for every student. For several days students will read and talk about the text, discussing anything they notice about the writing. The focus of the inquiry at this point is to try to figure out how the writer

Students will notice so much more than they would if the definition of the genre had been handed to them in the beginning.

Selecting Touchstone Texts

You have read the text and you love it.

“You” means the teacher! You love this text so much that you think just by reading it your students will fall instantly in love with it. Your love will be contagious.

You and your students have talked about the text a lot as readers first.

No piece of literature was written to be taken apart or dissected. It was written to speak to us and to help us change the lives we lead. Our first response to a piece of literature should be as readers. Talk first and talk well before you begin to dissect any piece of writing for your study.

You find many things to teach in the text.

The text feels full—teaching full. You see so much that you can teach using just this one piece of literature.

You can imagine talking about the text for a very long time.

Make sure that the text you choose can carry the weight of constant talk and examination.

Your entire class can have access to the text.

A touchstone no one can touch won't work. The piece you choose must be short enough to be put on overhead, make photocopies from, or have multiple copies of the book for no more than five or six students to share at a time.

Your students can read the text independently or with some support.

Because you are going to invest so much time and talk in this one piece of literature, you don't really need to worry about whether every child can read the text independently. This text is going to come with lots of support.

The text is a little more sophisticated than the writing of your best students.

You want every child to have to work to write like this author. Make sure you choose something that will be challenging. Trust the literature and study time to help students meet this challenge.

The text is written by a writer you trust.

When your back is up against a wall, have some old standbys to reach for. Have a few authors you know “by heart” and whose work you really trust.

The text is a good example of writing of a particular kind (genre).

There are some pieces of writing that are almost textbook examples of the genre. Look for these and save them *forever* because they so well represent what the genre is all about.

The text is of the genre that we are studying.

For first-time genre studies, try to keep the genre “pure”—meaning if you are studying memoir for the first time, you might not include memoir in the form of poetry or song. You might look only at narrative memoir that first time.

You have read the text and loved it.

And just in case you forgot, you have read it and fallen so deeply in love with this piece of writing that you feel privileged to use it in teaching. You run into your mini-lessons with joy because you have under your arm one of your favorites. Your love of the text is fuel for your study.

Figure 1. Characteristics of touchstone texts

went about the writing. Students discuss decisions they think the writers of touchstone texts have made about such things as what to include in plot, or whether to repeat a word for effect, or which punctuation to use. The purpose of this close study and the conversations around it is to help students envision new possibilities for their own writing.

In mini-lessons and conferences, the teacher is asking students to “try it,” try out the different writing moves they have noticed professional authors using. The touchstone try-it is safe, even playful. Students try things in notebooks and drafts just to see how they sound. If they like some writing a touchstone author has helped them

to do, they may include what they have tried in their actual publications. The try-its especially help students who are reluctant to revise, giving them a range of options to explore during revision. During a conference, a teacher might help a student try a writing move out loud so the student can hear how the writing would sound. The teacher is alert for places in notebooks and drafts where it might make sense to suggest try-its to students.

Writing

Students *write* throughout the genre study. They are collecting entries in their notebooks, nurturing seed ideas for projects,

playing with touchstone try-its, publishing pieces for their own reasons, and so on. In the step-by-step structural frame for genre study that I outlined above, the writing step refers to the drafting, revising, and editing of a published piece in the genre under study. The writing time for this is fairly short (usually about six days) because of all the genre study work that has come before it. There is an additional time period for the actual publishing of this piece of work if it is to be presented in a particular way, such as in a class magazine or in an anthology of poetry.

Reflecting/Assessing

After any study (genre or otherwise) the teacher and students should spend some time reflecting on and assessing their work. They should look at both their processes and their products. This assessment can be as simple as a narrative—having students answer a question, or several questions, about their work:

- How did going through this study feel?
- What was hard for you?
- What do you think about your finished piece?

Assessment may also be as demanding as a rubric created jointly by teacher and students. The assessment tool that you choose should reflect the sophistication of your students. I try to begin the year with the narrative question assessment, then move to checklists and rubrics, and end my year with a combination of both. Whichever tool you use should always lead to more talk among you and your students. Your goal is not just to have students complete writing projects. You want them to really understand these projects, and you want to use their understandings to revise your teaching.

The beauty of this frame for a genre study is that it can be used to organize so much good teaching in the writing work-

shop. The driving force behind this kind of study is the principle of immersion, the idea that students and teachers need to be deep readers of whatever kind of writing they are learning to do. And equally beautiful is the fact that you can be a learner alongside your students. Beginning a study means trusting the learner part of you. You don't need to know everything there is to know about a genre to do a genre study with your students. It is good to have some background knowledge—which you can acquire by reading examples of the genre, books by writers about writing, and books on the teaching of writing—but the best knowledge comes from active involvement in the study with your class.

Benefits of Study in the Classroom

Units of study are essential to the writing workshop because without them, what is the work of the workshop on a day-to-day basis? Like a learning map you and your students chart together, your studies create a year's worth of curriculum for the workshop that exposes students to new possibilities as writers.

Units of study help to set the pace for your workshop. They add quality and consistency that both students and teachers need in a workshop setting. When study is valued and arranged with skill and care in a school year, a teacher can both expose her students to many genres and have them become experts in a few. When units of study are planned around writing issues other than genre, students are exposed to a wide range of helpful curriculum for their writing lives. Smaller studies (mini-inquiries) of one week or so can be carefully placed between longer studies when they are necessary to meet student needs. These small studies create a sense of continuity in the work.

Many teachers have found it useful to develop a calendar for units of study

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during the year. One example is presented in the Classroom Connections at the end of this essay. Notice the units selected and the length of time allotted for each.

This calendar becomes public knowledge. It is the learning map that we and our students will use. Publication dates are spread out liberally across the calendar to insure that we will publish often and to give us something to live toward in our studies. This is the quality that we strive for in our work together: planfulness. It is something like how we live our social lives. We plan a social calendar with specific dates and occasions, but we always make sure we leave room for the unexpected—the last-minute tickets to a great play or the dinner invitation to the new restaurant in town.

Teachers have to think of curriculum calendars in much the same way: We learned that we cannot map out the whole year in August. We learned that to live towards study meant we had to plan several times a year. We had to look at our calendars and our students often and reshape our plans. We learned to trust our August thinking and our November thinking and to let one nourish the other. A part of that learning was to accept that we couldn’t really know what our whole calendar would look like until we got to June. It wasn’t that we weren’t thinking about June much earlier in the year. We just realized that we had to remain open to the possibilities that June might bring.

We also learned to take time (in August and at several points during the school year) to follow these lines of thinking:

- Can I imagine how I’d like the work to go?
- What would I like my students to get from a study?
- Why am I tackling this hard work?
- Can I imagine a time span?
- What are the structures I need to exist in my classroom to make this type of

learning possible? How can we get them in?

- How important are the writing notebooks going to be?
- What supplies and literature need to exist in this classroom to make our work possible, and where or how are we going to acquire them?
- What lessons will I need to teach? (Leave room for some you can’t imagine yet. Pay close attention to what is happening in your class. Take good notes. Study your conferences. THEN, ask yourself again, “What lessons will I need to teach?”)
- With whom will I share this learning journey? (Don’t travel alone. It’s easier with a friend by your side.)

We reflected on these questions periodically as a group and as individuals. They helped us know what needed to come next on our planful journey through the curriculum year.

Raising the Level of Work

We have found that sharing with our students this sort of “calendar approach” to planning for the writing workshop—setting publication dates and making clear what will be studied—has raised both the production level and the quality of writing our students produce. The predictable immersion part of any study of writing helps students learn to read like writers. Over time, reading like writers through thoughtful, well-planned units of study helps students develop an excellent sense of what good writing is so that they can identify and emulate it wherever they find it in the world.

Units of study in the writing workshop also allow students to discover the kinds of writers they are. The child that loves poetry will shine during the poetry study and cringe (perhaps) during the non-

fiction genre study but will have many spaces in between to write in the genre that she or he wishes. The beauty of genre study is that it never removes a child's right to choose a topic. Though students may gather to study a very particular kind of writing, they are always writing about topics they have chosen themselves. The studies strengthen their sense of craft and help them envision all the possibilities that exist for their ideas.

Note

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Classroom Connections/Isoke Titilayo Nia

Sample Yearlong Curriculum Chart

Dates of Publication/ Celebration	Units of Study	Type of Publication
1. September 25	Living the Writerly Life	varied genres
2. October 23	Memoir	memoir in prose form
3. November 30	Short Story (Fiction)	short story
4. December 23	Craft Study	varied genres
5. January 10	Revision	turning over a piece previously published
6. February 25	Nonfiction	feature article, essay, or editorial
7. March 15	Using Notebooks to Make Our Writing Better	varied genres
8. March 31	Structure	varied genres
9. April 30	Memoir	memoir as poetry or vignette
10. May 20	Literary Response (Writing in Response to Reading)	book review and literary criticism (two pieces)
11. June 20	Revision	turning over a piece previously published

Classroom Connections/Isoké Titilayo Nia

Blank Chart to Use for Planning

Dates of Publication/ Celebration	Units of Study	Type of Publication
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		
7.		
8.		
9.		
10.		
11.		

BRIDGING THE THEME

In the next article, Amy Arnberg, a brave teacher, skillfully walks us through a study that began in the summer with the need to capture memories of her own grandmother. She used the sound of the children's voices to fill her classroom with the sound of memoir. She was brave enough to include her own voice, and her teaching was richer because of this. From day one her students believed they had stories that matched those of their mentors. Because Amy placed the students' stories alongside those of their mentors, their narratives were considered just as moving and as powerful. What also made Amy's study so powerful was her trust in the power of literature. She relied on the gathered literature to define the genre and didn't let the students' correct or incorrect hypotheses force her into giving them a dictionary definition. She trusted literature to give Jesse and Jillian and Eytan time to construct their own definitions of this genre. This very sophisticated teacher was not afraid to follow the questions of her students during the inquiry. The assessment tools used by Amy addressed the individual genre study and held her children to a standard. It was a standard that her students achieved because they helped create the measurement tool. Good, well-planned teaching allows you to do this.