

Writing Workshop Professional Development: A Necessary Tool towards Developing our Future Writers

Bettina Forman
Terraset Elementary School
Fairfax County Public Schools

Before becoming a reading teacher, I aspired to be a writer. I completed manuscripts for several classes at Georgetown University's adult education program and at the Bethesda Writer's Center. I attended conferences and joined a writer's group. *Highlights* magazine held one of my poems for possible publication (it didn't happen) and several publishers read my murder mystery, and sent encouragement along with rejections letters. I finally got a story published in *Washington Women*, my swan song. Ultimately, I decided the writer's life was not for me, at least not full time, and I became an educator.

Flash forward several years and I am a reading specialist at a diverse school in Reston, Virginia. Nearly 40% of our students live in poverty. Students come from dozens of countries around the world. Our staff is warm and open, full of talented teachers. As every teacher in Virginia knows, all elementary school teachers teach writing, both as a craft and throughout the day in the content areas. However, when I surveyed the staff of 50 teachers and specialists, I discovered that most colleges and universities do not prepare future educators to teach the craft of writing. To survey the staff, I simply sent out an email asking them to answer the question, "Did you take a class in Writing of any kind in college or graduate school?" Every teacher queried responded. Only one had taken a class specifically in Writing, a special education teacher in graduate school. My experience was different. I had taken a Composition class in college and a Writing Workshop class in graduate school for my Reading Specialist degree. The Writing Workshop class taught students to *be* writers and inspired my decision to create a professional development class at my school in the same way.

The need is clear. Unless they attend professional development classes at the school or county/division level, most teachers do not know how, and some are not aware, that writing should be taught as a craft. While teachers expect students to

write, many focus solely on mechanics, including capitalizing, spelling, and sentence structure. Without direct instruction and experience as writers, they have little else in their toolboxes to share with students.

This situation is a serious concern. According to the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE, 2004) Guideline, “People learn to write by writing... This means actual writing, not merely listening to lectures about writing, doing grammar drills, or discussing writing.” The guideline indicate that students must have extended experience writing in and out of class. School staff should be supporting students in developing “writing lives, habits, and preferences for life outside school.”

According to *The Neglected R: A Report of The National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges* by The College Board (2003), the teaching of writing is often shortchanged in America’s school system, despite the fact that through writing students cement and connect their knowledge in other subject areas. The authors state, “Common expectations about writing should be developed across disciplines through in-service workshops designed to help teachers understand good writing and develop as writers themselves” (p. 5).

O’Donnell-Allen (2012) authored an article in *The Atlantic* entitled, *The Best Writing Teachers Are Writers Themselves*, bemoaning the five paragraph essay, and the assign-respond-grade “closed circuit” teaching she endured as a student. She makes the case that indeed, “The best writing teachers are writers themselves...because we know the writing process inside out, we can support our students’ work in authentic ways” (para 11).

In her text *When Writers Read*, University of Virginia professor Jane Hansen states,

It has taken us years to realize that the most important act of a writer is to write, and setting aside time in school for it is paramount. We value writing, and to show our value system, we set aside time for the classroom of writers – including ourselves – to write. We honor this act. But how can teachers honor this act if they don’t write?

As Hansen and multitudes of other writing professionals have said, you are a writer if you write. It is that simple, and that complicated, for in this day of emails and tweets, very few people write other than for basic communication.

By offering professional development classes in writing workshop, reading specialists are in a unique position to help teachers understand how being a writer helps them to be more effective as writing teachers. Teachers develop their skills as writers in order to teach writing. If their writing practice is limited to emails and lessons plans, teachers will be limited in their ability to develop the writers in their

classrooms. Offering writing classes through professional development affords teachers a way to develop as writers.

In their recent article, *Growing Extraordinary Writers: Leadership Decisions to Raise the Level of Writing Across a School and a District*, Calkins and Ehrenworth (2016) speak to the importance of district support for teachers to improve their writing skills through professional development. “Professional development can transform the teaching of writing in your building. Professional development will be the heartbeat of your school. It should be intense, collaborative, collegial, and practical...Good professional development creates lasting communities of practice” (p. 13). Additionally, Katie Wood Ray and Lester Laminack (2001) explain the following in *The Writing Workshop: Working Through the Hard Parts (And They’re All Hard Parts)*:

In the best writing workshops I have ever seen, the student can tell you all about their teacher as a writer...the tone of the teaching in a room where the students know their teachers as people will always be different than the tone in rooms where the students know their teachers as people who ask them to do something that they don’t actually do themselves.

At my elementary school in Reston, Virginia, I asked the principal if I could teach a class in writing workshop for our teachers before the school day began. Teachers would give up planning time in order to participate. I proposed a six class series over six consecutive weeks. She readily agreed and offered recertification points for those who completed the class. I had presented other series of professional development on writing over the past few years, usually focusing on how to initiate a writing workshop in the classroom, including viewing of videos of workshop lessons, conferring sessions, etc. This time I wanted to “soft sell” the workshop and ratchet up the engagement by making the teachers student writers.

They would *be* the writers working on their own snapshot stories, sharing their work with colleagues, conferring with me when they felt the need, and getting feedback from tablemates as well. Occasionally, I commented on how to translate the concepts and practices we discussed and used in the workshop to their classrooms. However, the primary focus was on writing for its sake alone. The classes were held for 45 minutes on consecutive Thursday mornings before school, ending a half hour before school officially began so that teachers still had time for morning prep and for specialists to make it to morning duty. Teachers came in before contract hours and gave up planning time to participate. The class was offered to all 50 teachers and staff at my school, Terraset Elementary, including those who teach art, music, and PE. Thirty teachers signed up for the class, including classroom teachers in grades one through six, special education teachers, an Instructional Assistant, and the school librarian. A few teachers dropped the

class because of scheduling conflicts. The majority attended all six workshops. The School-Based Technology Specialist set up the class in MyPLT, Fairfax County's official site to sign up for academies and other school-based classes. The class was called "The Basics: Writing Workshop," and was advertised via email to staff.

The writing workshops followed a structured pattern. Each class was focused on a specific step in the writing process. Using PowerPoint, I projected a clear statement of the teaching point followed by a slide enumerating the why, the how, and the when in the writing process that it is used. To bolster the utility of the teaching point, and for inspiration, I included quotations from renowned published authors about their writing process. The last segment of the mini-lesson consisted of guided practice, using the teaching point using an example from my own writing or a mentor text. For example, I used my writing for the lessons on sifting through memory for writing topics and both my writing and mentor texts for lessons on revision. While the teachers wrote, I left the enumerated steps projected for reference and conferred with anyone who requested a conference or looked like they needed help.

Each 45-minute class included a five to 10-minute mini-lesson, 25 to 30 minutes of writing and five to 10 minutes of sharing or reflection. Sharing was optional, and could be done in small table groups, with one partner, or to the whole class. Teachers were able to take their direct experiences in the class and use them in their own classrooms.

The lesson topics/mini-lessons included:

- **Class One:** Gather ideas for snapshot stories from childhood or anytime in your life using heart maps, hand maps (Dorfman & Cappelli, 2007) and lists.
- **Class Two:** First revision strategy – Cut out the unnecessary words to sharpen your writing (Heard, 2002).
- **Class Three:** Rewrite your lead three different ways to consider which one best serves your story (Fletcher & Portalupi, 1998).
- **Class Four:** Use mentor texts to aid your own writing. Choose a narrative that feels like something you could write. Analyze the lead and the details the writer used for ideas for your own writing.
- **Class Five:** Second revision strategy – Expand an important part to uncover details of the memory (Hansen, 2007).
- **Class Six:** Endings: Write or revise your ending to leave the reader with the feeling you want them to walk away with after reading your story (Fletcher & Portalupi, 1998).

Inspirational quotations from writers that related to my teaching points added weight to those points. I deliberately selected a range of authors to demonstrate the universality of their advice on writing, including Anne Lamott,

Flannery O’Conner, Ernest Hemingway, Roald Dahl, and David Sedaris. In the second class on revision, I used a quotation from Road Dahl:

By the time I’m nearing the end of a story, the first part will have been reread, and altered, and corrected at least one hundred and fifty times. I’m suspicious of facility and speed. Good writing is essentially rewriting. I’m positive of this.

As a popular children’s author, Dahl’s quote was especially valuable for teachers to share with students when encouraging them to revise.

Mentor texts were valuable resources to demonstrate teaching points in nearly all the lessons. Some of the mentor texts I used included *Washington Post Magazine’s* column “Mine, What Small Thing Holds Meaning for You?”, An article from *Girls* creator Lena Dunham, another from David Sedaris, and a third from Kate DiCamillo writing in *The Washington Post* about one of her favorite children’s book authors, Beverly Cleary.

Once the class ended, I sent out a Google survey to the participants with both yes, no, somewhat, and free response questions. The survey began with this statement:

I would appreciate your valuable input on the writing workshop professional development class we had this winter. I’d like to know whether it was valuable, whether it influenced anything about your teaching of writing, and to have your input on whether you would like me to teach other writing classes or classes on other topics. I’d also appreciate any constructive criticism.

Ten participants took the survey. All of the survey respondents checked “yes” to the first four questions below for which they could check “yes,” “no,” or “somewhat.” The fifth question received nine “yeses” and one “somewhat.”

1. Was the class an effective use of your time?
2. Did participating in the class make you feel more confident in your teaching of writing?
3. Did you find the mini-lessons and power points to be effective?
4. Would you take another class with me? (participant could check specific topics)
5. Did participating in the class help you by developing your own writing?

Free response questions and participant’s answers include:

- “What was the best part of the class for you?”
 - *The class caused me to reflect on my individual style as a writer and who was my target audience. It was a bit revealing and personal. I enjoyed it.*

- *A great opportunity for personal development along with relationship development with colleagues.*
- *Realizing/remembering that sometimes we can't think of anything to write about so I could remind my students of this! And empathize.*
- “What constructive criticism can you give me?”
 - *Make us participate verbally*
 - *I wish there were more mentor texts and examples.*
 - *You are always well prepared and approachable in your presentations! Thank you!*
- “Please write any comment you would like to make:”
 - *By taking this class it has renewed my hunger for daily journal. Although I am not fond of sharing my writing. I still enjoy just getting things down and going back to them later. It has come to be a sense of “therapy” for me.*

The success of the class in developing teachers as writers was reflected by the fact that teachers submitted their stories to our school’s literary magazine for the first time since its inception. Additionally, I sent an email to participants at the beginning of the 2016-2017 school year asking them to reply with a note about whether the class helped you with teaching writing this year with a specific example of how. Responses include:

- *When I went to write in the classroom setting with other people, it reminded me of how hard it can be to come up with a topic...As an adult...Which made me realize how hard this can be for children. After taking your workshop, I made sure to remind students of this experience I had so they know that it IS hard to come up with something to write about, whether you are a child or adult...I felt that you made writing a safe place where all of us in class felt comfortable writing down personal stories- knowing that they were our own and we didn't necessarily have to share. I make sure to try to make my class as comfortable and safe as possible...This year I had a student write about her grandfather who passed away. Her story was pretty moving and I first made sure to ask if I could read it. She said I could but said she wanted to keep the story private and not share out in a small or whole group. Since there is no pressure, people are more likely to write things that are meaningful to them without fear of judgement.*
- *I look forward to another class with you! One of my huge take aways from the last class is “uninterrupted” writing. By me just letting them write, I am getting great writing pieces and when we conference together, they look at their writing with “new eyes.” Another take away is not always telling them*

what to write about, again...just letting them write. Giving my students more choice is producing better, more in-depth writings.

- *There were many takeaways for me, as simple as my hand got tired and as important as the value of talking about my stories. I have spent more time allowing kids sharing time each writing block.*

Reflecting back, I feel the class was effective for the following reasons. Teachers do care about developing their skills as teachers of writing. The course was short enough both in class time and duration that the commitment did not feel overwhelming. While the teachers were the students, they could easily see how they could turn around and develop similar lessons for their students because the structure of the lessons mirrored the structure of the writing workshop for students in elementary school. The teachers appreciated having the time to write and experiencing the writing process as a student, which was evidenced by their responses in the survey. The awarding of recertification points for attending the lessons was likely an additional incentive for participation.

Based on my experience having teachers become the writers, I encourage my colleagues, reading and literacy specialists, to offer a series of writing workshop lessons such as these at their schools. While it may seem unorthodox to ask teachers to become the students in this mode of professional development, the energy and excitement in the room each week, and the way individuals expressed satisfaction and even relief at the opportunity to express themselves, get feedback, and understand the writing process, proved it to be a worthwhile experiment. For reading specialists and literacy leaders who are interested in running writing workshop professional development at their schools, as a first step, begin by seeking the approval of the administrator and request that he or she grant recertification points to participants. Next, assess the writing needs of those in your building, either by surveying teachers, querying teachers during collaborative learning teams, or by observing writing lessons in your school. Then, using the assessment of writing needs, decide on the teaching points you wish to cover, create a blurb describing the class, and advertise the class within your building.

Helping teachers become more familiar and comfortable with the writing process, and facilitating their empowerment as teachers of writing was a strong first step towards improving the level of writing instruction at Terraset Elementary. I plan to offer additional series at my school, focusing on topics such as poetry or informational writing. I am also considering whether this model of professional development might be adapted for the teaching of reading strategies, word study, and other fundamentals of teaching reading and writing. Learning in a new way can replace memories of outdated methods of teaching from our childhoods.

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