

The Classroom Impact of Writer's Workshop
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The ability to write is a fundamental skill all students should feel comfortable doing because they will be using it for the rest of their lives. The process to write is not an innate skill. The process to organize, draft, and edit is a learned skill (Calkins & Ehrenworth, 2016). As the world evolves and develops into a technology-driven society, connecting people to new ideas, concepts, and others across the globe, people of all ages are writing more than ever (Calkins & Ehrenworth, 2016). People are communicating through texts, tweets, email, and social media. Students' lack of writing skills is a major concern of the National Commission on Writing (NCW). According to the NCW, students' development of writing instruction including organization, ideas, conventions, and language facility is termed as deficient (Bridges and Culham, as cited in Sessions, Kang, & Womack, 2011). The three "R's" of education are known and loved as reading, writing, and arithmetic. With the recent writing deficiency research for students spanning from elementary to high school, writing has been termed as the neglected "R" (Sessions, et al., 2016). The NCW research shows a need for writing instruction that supports and scaffolds the 21st-century learning that takes place in classrooms. Although there is a technology push, as mentioned by Calkins and Ehrenworth, students will excel in the future as long as they have guided and scaffolded writing instruction. Therefore, the objective of this paper was to examine the research to determine if a structured writer's workshop block, including one-on-one conferences, would improve a student's writing achievement and engagement. The research that was gathered elucidated the strategy of writer's workshop in the classroom by reviewing its history, structure, elements, as well as its strengths and weaknesses for teachers and students alike.

What is Writer's Workshop?

Writer's workshop can be understood as an uninterrupted time for students to write every day at their own pace. Throughout the workshop, teachers integrate various types of scaffolded and differentiated instruction for students through a whole group mini-lesson, individual writing time, one-on-one student-led conferences, and a time for students to share their writing with their peers. Each of those elements are critical pieces that are integrated every day into the writing block. Students are given the freedom to choose their topic within the focused genre resulting in pure ownership and pride of their pieces leading to higher time on task percentages (Votteler & Miller, 2017). This workshop allows the writing instruction to be focused on the writer's skill development and process, rather than the final product as traditional test preparation prioritizes (Miller, Berg, & Cox, 2016). Throughout the workshop, the roles of the teacher and student are cohesive and collaborative resulting in a flexible plan that creates a partnership for learning (Cooper & Kiger, as cited in Miller, et al., 2016). The process of writing and developing one's own thoughts involves risk. Consequently, children need to know that their environment during the workshop is predictable and safe to become vulnerable. To encourage students to be in control of their writing, they also need to have ownership and confidence to get their own paper, ask classmates for assistance, and evaluate their own work. Although the control sounds simple, the result of the research shows that students participating in a predictable writing time every day inherit authentic habits of writers and are able to work independently longer (Atwell, as cited in Smithson, 2008).

History of Writer's Workshop

Spanning over the years, various researchers and educators confirm that writer's workshop is an authentic and effective way to allow students to encounter the writing process. Many researchers and educators have approached the workshop model and added, supplemented, and expanded on the key foundation. Numerous contributors to the writing curriculum include Nancy Atwell, Lucy Calkins, and Donald Graves. These contributors wrote books to guide teachers through their research. They have contributed guidance and strategies for educators using the writer's workshop model (Smithson, 2008). Over time, despite different opinions, the core values of the workshop have remained the same. The core values of the workshop can be summarized across all research of being a predictable block of time where teachers facilitate and scaffold writing instruction so students can perceive themselves as authors. Beginning in 1987, Atwell defined her workshop as combining the writing process of prewriting and planning, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing along with peer and teacher conferencing and mini-lessons. A few years later, Donald Graves expanded on the process and outlined the optimal conditions for writing to be time, choice, response, demonstration, expectation, room structure, and evaluation. Although those are just two examples, writer's workshop has evolved into what it is today (Votteler & Miller, 2017). In more recent years, researchers such as Wolf and Wolf, Routman, and Miller, Berg, and Cox have voiced that teachers are instructing students solely by the pressure of extensive test preparation and standardized tests that they are being pulled to explicitly use prompts and rubrics dissecting the joy and creativity out of writing (Votteler & Miller, 2017). Gail Tompkins wrote in 2017 that, "writers workshop is the best way to implant the writing process" (p. 359, as cited in Votteler & Miller, 2017). Miller, Berg, and Cox expand

on why writer's workshop is the best way to implant the process by stating, "process-oriented instruction encompasses 'the human act of composing' and 'the human gesture of response' preparing students to write for any purpose they may encounter throughout their lives" in comparison to the use of prompts and rubrics to teach to the test mentioned above (2016, p. 58).

Structure of the model

The structure of writer's workshop includes the three essential elements of: protected time to write, choice, and response in the form of feedback as outlined by Calkins and Ehrenworth (2016). These three elements are covered through the structure that takes place during the writer's workshop block that is suggested by many researchers to last anywhere from 45 to 60 minutes. The whole structure includes an introductory mini-lesson to discuss the focus of the day, independent writing time for all students, one-on-one conferences that take place during the independent work time, and ends with one to three students sharing their work with the class to receive feedback (Hawkins, 2016). Throughout the planning process, the teacher's focus should be on the writer. Brian Kissel and Erin Miller discuss, in a writer's workshop the significance is placed on the writer. The writer influences the mini-lesson, leads the conference, determines their topic and purpose for writing, engages in their process, crafts a product, seeks responses, and asserts their voice (2015).

Mini-Lesson

The purpose of the mini-lesson is to engage students right away on the writing focus of for the day. Just as any other lesson has an anticipatory set to grab the student's attention and get them excited right away, a mini-lesson is comparable for the writing block. Lisa Gair (2015) writes about her experience with mini-lessons and the importance of involving mentor texts. She

explains that mini-lessons focus on the art of writing regularly, modeled through the use of mentor texts as instructional guides to help writers sharpen their skills. She continues to illustrate the use of various texts such as *The Kissing Hand*, to show how to expand an idea across the page and *Voices in the Park*, to demonstrate how stories depend on perspective. Mentor texts teach the craft of writing and help mold writers to their full potential. Kissel and Miller (2015) reiterate the importance of the mini-lesson and the use of mentor texts. They explained that it is not to prompt what or how students write, however they are used to get students thinking as writers and excited about their piece. Calkins describes this brief, five to ten-minute time to be an opportunity where a teacher raises a concern, explores an issue, models a technique, or reinforces a strategy (1986, as cited in Smithson, 2008).

Time to Write

The largest section of time during the workshop is devoted to students' writing time. As stressed by Graves, Calkins, and Ehrenworth, the habitual time for students to write independently is key to a successful writer's workshop. During this, on average 30-minute section, students brainstorm, write, edit, and confer with peers or the teacher (Gair, 2015). The time spent writing is a highly structured, yet flexible time where the student's goal is to work on their piece where they are at, while incorporating the instruction from the mini-lesson. It is crucial to remember that students will all be at their own pace. Teachers cannot assume students will all be on the same part of the writing process at once (Smithson, 2008). Similar to running, reading, or any other skill that is practiced, writing is a skill that improves with use.

Conferring

Conferring or facilitating one-on-one writing conferences occurs simultaneously with the independent writing time. The purpose of these intentional conferences is for the teacher to give students a time to reflect on and lead a conversation about their writing. Lisa Hawkins (2016) defines this time as:

A pedagogical tool where space is provided for participants to recognize and articulate individual strengths and goals, as well as try out new writing strategies to move toward greater independence as writers. Moreover, they function as a type of formative assessment that aids the teacher in her understanding of where students are in relation to the mini-lessons they have undergone and what steps are needed to nudge their writing the next level (p. 8).

Depending on class size and length of writing time, educators can meet with anywhere from four to eight students during this time. A typical conference is relatively short lasting five to ten minutes focusing on a specific student's need (Gair, 2015). Amy Michaelson, second grade teacher and writing professional development leader, always begins her conferences by asking the writer she is meeting with, "What are you working on today?" (personal communication, January 2, 2019). The beginning of the conference sets the tone and the goal is to have the student lead the conversation. Donald Graves (1991) suggests many questions such as: Where did the idea for this piece come from? What writing stage are you at now? What are you going to do next? (as cited in Smithson, 2008). After receiving a response, the writer reads some of their piece aloud, fostering ownership and pride of their piece. Amy Michaelson stressed the point, "Do not write on their piece! It is important that we are merely suggesting ideas and thinking

aloud questions for them to self-reflect on, our job during the conference is not to correct or write for the student” (personal communication, January 2, 2019). Following the child’s lead, letting the child talk, and letting the child understand that what they know about their writing is paramount to the teacher’s opinion about how they should write are key suggestions from Lisa Hawkins (2016). Likewise, within the conferring time, teachers are now the passive beings, allowing students to take ownership of their piece, speak up for their learning, communicate their needs and ideas, and speak with their teachers as collaborators (Hawkins, 2016). The teacher has an important and challenging role of listening and responding solely with at most two praise points and a two teaching points, or skills to focus on when they return to independent writing time. It is suggested that the teacher takes notes over the conference to use as a formative assessment to maintain record of where a student is performing and what skills they consistently excel and struggle with (Miller, et al., 2016). Referring back to Calkins and Ehrenworth’s three essential elements, a response in the form of feedback takes place during the conference. They added that researcher John Hattie argued that the best feedback includes praise and teaching points, specifying that feedback is most powerful when students do not yet have mastery and when it is given while students are still working (2016).

Sharing

The day’s writing concludes by inviting all students back to the gathering spot to provide a time for students who exhibited the focus of the mini-lesson in their writing to share with the whole class. The desire to share their writing is discussed during the conference after the teacher compliments the writer on his or her work associated with the mini-lesson focus. It is important to never force writers to share, instead encourage them (Smithson, 2008). Students who share

take a seat in the coveted “author’s chair.” While sharing in Amy Michaelson’s classroom, students receive two stars and a wish [compliments and something to improve on], in order to continue receiving specific feedback for the next time they write independently (personal communication, January 2, 2019). Sharing most often looks like students reading a piece aloud, but it can be finalizing a piece as a typed product, hanging the piece up on the wall, adding the piece to a portfolio, or even showing the work to a peer. Concluding the writer’s workshop block with a time to share is important because it helps the students feel valued as writers, gain confidence in their own writing abilities, and heightens the level of enjoyment that students feel about writing (Smithson, 2008).

Strengths and Weaknesses

Throughout the research, there were many themes that overlapped. Overall, the strengths conveyed across articles and research papers were reaching all students where they are, differentiating instruction based on student needs, and fostering independence and pride in students’ work through ownership and engagement. On the other hand, there were weaknesses that stemmed from the structure. The weaknesses that were shown were the amount of setup and pre-teaching the concept of the workshop takes so students can work independently, organizing the conferring structure, and finally, sticking to the timeline every day.

The research showed that implementing a structured writer’s workshop has benefited students in the same situation as mine. With a large range of ability that spanned from below to above level achievement and engagement that ranged from loathing to adoring writing, my students needed a system that kept them excited about their own writing and met them where they were at. Staying on task was another element my class struggled with. After reading that

Votteler and Miller (2018) and Smithson (2008) found success with increased time on task as well as ownership of their work, I knew that I needed to implement the workshop in my classroom.

Meeting students where they are at and supporting their exact needs is the goal of a successful teacher. Through writing conferences, students are given undivided attention and the teacher can instruct intensively in the student's zone of proximal development. The zone of proximal development is the area between where students can be successful without assistance and what they can do with some assistance from their teacher (Smithson, 2008). My students needed to know that they had access to a time devoted to them to be able to ask the questions they had and receive compliments on their hard work that encouraged them to continue writing.

While the conferring that takes place during the writer's workshop block is valuable, it is arguably one of the most challenging parts of instruction according to Hawkins (2016). She honors the positive impact they bring to students but knowing what is said and moreover, how it is said can impact a child's writing skill development takes a lot of practice and awareness. Although it was a shift in what writing time looked, sounded, and felt like for my students and I, the tedious planning and tricky period of instilling new habits was all worth it when I saw an increase in achievement and engagement.

Conclusion

Supporting students on their journey as writers is the goal of writer's workshop. The time spent to maximize instruction and learning for all students where they are at in the writing process is well worth the outcome of fostering proud and passionate writers. Implementing all elements of the structure: mini-lesson, time to write/one-on-one conferences, and a time to share

with fidelity ensures that the strengths of writer's workshop shine through. Donald Graves once said, "We'll spend a lifetime crafting our own teaching in order to allow children to be the authors of their own texts." Although the planning and practice that it took to implement the workshop was tedious and took strategy, the outcome of my students being able to write on their own is a skill that they will need today and every day.

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