Awakening the Writing Student and the Writing Teacher: Bringing Meaning to Student Writing and Purpose to Teaching

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We cannot teach writing well unless we trust that there are real, human reasons to write.
- Lucy Calkins (2003)

Introduction

Previous writing experiences with my elementary students have left me with a strong desire to imbue literacy events with more vibrant, social justice-oriented ways of working and learning. In some of my earlier teaching experiences, I have neglected to inform students of a more comprehensive, purposeful and critical approach to writing. These approaches have leaned towards process writing, rather than towards a student (and teacher) awareness of the power of writing. Partially, this was due to my inexperience in using a fully integrated, whole language approach to teaching, and it was also out of a lack of understanding about the teaching of writing itself. I have relied more heavily on teaching the functions and features of texts, with less of a focus on teaching the transformative elements of texts (e.g., voice), and how students interact within those texts depending, and how they are positioned within them (Heffernan & Lewison, 2003). I wanted my teaching to fully embody the elements of a critical literacy perspective (Vasquez, 2003).

The aim of this reflective paper is to explore the world of the writing workshop (Calkins, 2003; Graves, 1994) through a critical lens by looking carefully at what my role in the instruction of writing has been thus far. It outlines the reflexive process that occurred in deconstructing the teaching of writing in a class with children who have multiple exceptionalities, and describes the route I took in challenging underlying assumptions about the purpose of writing. I have analyzed how writing has been positioned in my practice and in relation to students’ abilities. It is also an attempt to set in motion more innovative ways of teaching writing. Another part of this journey relates to my strong desire to bring a critical perspective to student work in all curricular areas, but in particular when using literacy as a vehicle. The questions that have led this experience include, but are not limited to the following: To what extent have my students had ownership in the process of learning to write and what is my role in relation to how students learn about the intricacies of writing? Which writer’s workshop frameworks are relevant to my students needs, and how can I infuse them with critical literacy? Along the way, I have also discovered that what I perceived to be true of my beliefs has not always meshed with my day-to-day practice. This is a very personal account of the incongruities related to language instruction throughout this particular phase of my teaching life.
I would like to share some of my underlying experiences with writing as it relates to the personal realm. Writing is something I often, though not always, accomplish out of academic necessity. A lot of my writing is concerned with making shopping lists or sending e-mail, but some of it also occurs in moments of inspiration to take action in community settings or as a therapeutic measure when facing personal difficulty. Unfortunately, I only write poetry when I am experiencing personal turmoil, because my writing, as amateur as it may be, has given me some relief, and empowerment through difficult times. As of late, my daughter and I have been enjoying daily storytelling sessions so much that we are planning to put them into print. As well, the children’s book I have started and hope to publish is a multi-genre, historical account of an event that occurred in Chile, my birth country. My inspiration was to give my daughter and children like her the possibility of being aware of stories that are buried in the consciousness of a people, but when uncovered can change our world view. Beyond this, I have not participated to a high degree in real, purposeful writing in my personal life.

I do notice that the writers I most admire (e.g., Pablo Neruda, Isabel Allende, Mario Benedetti, Jose Saramago) have touched or moved me because of their eloquence as much as the hardships they have endured. I tend to gravitate towards the work of artists with social messages or themes of lived chaos and hope.

Having come across Peter Elbow’s work (2004) recently, I am reminded of why I have chosen to write for personal reasons when I have, and I think, that simply put, writing equals power. Elbow (2004) states that because children can write what they can say, they are better situated for the act of writing. The primacy of oral language is crucial in all language acquisition, but particularly in its role in the production of writing. Elbow suggests, that in comparison, reading is significantly less accessible to young children because they can only read that which they have learned to decode. When we write, we hold power, not over others, rather the power is located in our ability to construct and sculpt that which we are thinking and wanting to occur; because writing carries a constant message, it can serve as a means that can carry a thought, belief or the word, through time and space. This cannot be done solely by engaging in reading, listening or speaking, even when we do so critically. Even when we consider the many limitations that restrict delivering these messages to others (e.g., writing in a language that billions of people may not read), it is obvious that the importance of writing does not lay merely in its ability to simply carry a message, instead, its power lays in our ability to shape the message and do something with it.

I had to ask myself, was I creating writing opportunities for my students where they were the creators of meaning? Could they have more opportunities for writing pieces that were more empowering? What could be the implications and the accomplishments of trying writer’s workshop within a special education setting?

My Classroom

My class is called a M. I. D. (or Mild Intellectual Disabilities) class in our school board. There are six students, split evenly, gender-wise. All but one student have very low socio-economic status in relation to the rest of the student population. All were born in Canada, and two students self-identify with membership in other countries. All of the
students have multiple exceptionalities (a combination of Autism, language or hearing “impairments”, learning disabilities, chromosomal disorders, and a host of other medical, cognitive and physical challenges). Many of them work on an “Alternative Curriculum” that is not based on the Ontario Curriculum, but rather on what is determined by their needs. They are all emergent writers. Except for two students, they “role play” write and can often assign meaning to their writing (e.g., letter approximations, symbols and scribbles). The majority of their writing work incorporates, at a maximum, short phrases or sentences.

It is important to explain here that I took over this multi-age grouping from a teacher who relied heavily on the use of code-breaking resources such as Jolly Phonics (Lloyd, 2002). When I inherited that class, a very gifted teaching assistant “showed me the ropes” giving me support as to how the class had been run previous to me arriving there. Given that I had never before worked with children with multiple exceptionalities, I used the previous teacher’s resources, format and routines in order to maintain what had already been established in the class. My uneasiness with focusing so much of my time on teaching mostly code-breaking strategies provided the thrust for this project, as I knew that these students, as limited as they were in their abilities could engage in more critical aspects of writing.

**Evolution of Writer’s workshop in my Classroom**

In order to understand my role in teaching writing, I did an informal audit of the different genres and forms we worked on that year and it became immediately evident to me that most of our writing experiences allowed children to primarily use pragmatic and code-breaking resources. We have done much social writing, all of it in relation to real purposes: invitations to classroom celebrations, letters to friends, cards, thank-you notes to classroom guests and one letter about environmental issues. The majority of our writing revolves around innovating on texts and creating simple pattern books on math and social studies themes (e.g., shapes in our world, our family ABC, somewhere today, a book of peace). The ABC books and the innovation on text class-made books are usually rich in personal meaning and are well-read texts in our class because students add their own family photographs and anecdotes. Sadly, one of my favourite genres - poetry - is evident in only one class-made book.

Because I often engage my students in food experiences, we have participated in numerous procedural writing experiences and most of this writing is based on baking and cooking (making fruit salad, ice-cream, applesauce, pizza, and cheese). Almost none of it can be considered to be critical literacy in the least. I also noticed the lack of balance in most of these writing pieces: They are always done as language experience charts, (some of which find their way to publishing if they are transcribed using “adult” syntactic structures), but the students participate less than I would like. I recently read that the “kind” of students in my self-contained classroom, often end up working in menial jobs, which include working in the food service industry. The document I read was given to me at a workshop intended for teachers in MID settings to use so that we can do activities with students that will help them with functional skills in the future (e.g., to earn a living). Though I engage my students in many cooking experiences, I do it for the pure enjoyment of it, however, I must now consider the ways in which I am aiding them or hindering their lives in years to come. I have much reflection ahead of me, as I work
through how to encourage each and every piece of student writing, into work that
develops in students, positive self-image, the ability to work collaboratively, and the
ability to develop emotional literacy skills.

The fore-mentioned “audit” left me wondering which writing frameworks I
should use with my students. Immediately after having read about educator-researcher
Nina Zaragosa’s experience in the writer’s workshop with students, I made sure that I
started the next day using her inspiration and experiences in order to have students just
write and publish immediately as suggested. Another immediate change I made during
the Literacy Block was to increase the time allotment for writing to be on par with
reading instruction. Zaragosa (2002) believes that one fundamental aspect in creating
writers is to provide sustained and daily writing times. My hope was to create less
teacher-led, and more student-driven writing students; they would have to be more
authentically-engaged than in the past. Creating this workshop would mean having to
delve more deeply into the many aspects of process writing and an important part of this
was providing more time, as well as the resources to foster writing about their own lives.

I decided to officially launch the writer’s workshop in direct relation to our daily
communications, as the workshop always takes place immediately following community
meetings, which are held several times a week to discuss personal dilemmas, problem-
solving situations, generate some solutions, and share news from the home-front.
Sometimes the community meetings start with a prompt: “Which animal best represents
you today?” or “Which colour are you feeling today?” Students use a “talking stick” that
is passed to others to ensure turn-taking expectations are followed. I chose to guide, but
not limit, student writing to themes present in our meetings where we spend most of our
time talking over feelings, concerns, experiences and questions.

In our first workshop, I began by using a think-aloud on how to choose a topic
based on using less predictable storylines, as outlined by Calkins & Mermelstein (2003),
since I had an inkling that my students would choose themes with little variations from
what they’ve discussed in the past. “I will write about skipping with a friend,” I started.
“Well that doesn’t sound very exciting…I would rather write about something that is
close to my heart. I know! I’ll write about a time I had to decide whether to play with
students I liked, or stand up for a friend they rejected because of the colour of her skin. I
think this will make a more interesting story.” I relayed a real event that occurred when I
was in elementary school, where my friend faced exclusion based on the racist sentiments
of older students. I felt that the poignancy and simplicity of my story would effectively
allow me to model the process of choosing a topic for their writing. As I wrote each part,
I stopped to talk about the sketches I drew to accompany the words, (though in later
workshops, I would have to do two mini-lessons on making picture choices that support
writing.) I fashioned an enlarged version of 11 x 17 storyboards for the students.

Subsequent workshops gave students a chance to explore and write about their
themes using the storyboards based on a variation suggested by Heffernan (2004). Rather
than use sticky notes, as she did, I used strips of paper, with lines for writing and each
had an area for sketches. This would allow students to revise and alter their work and
when finished, put in order their stories in a sequenced manner that allowed us to see
where there were gaps. Heffernan’s main rationale for using sticky notes was to allow
students to remove and replace the notes when student writing took other directions, a
strategy I appreciate, but one that I would rather avoid during the initial stages of the
workshop with my students. I just wanted them to gain a sense of accomplishment without making it an onerous process for them, considering that much of their work had been scribed before.

Though most of my students are akin to pre-school and kindergarten children in many areas of their development, I explicitly chose not to use a labels-to-pictures approach as the authors suggest for beginning the workshop with kindergarten children (Calkins & Mermelstein). My reasons for this are two-fold: I have two students who I thought would benefit from a more substantial example, and I could revisit the workshop with the other students using such a format in the future, if necessary. But most importantly, I felt that labels-to-pictures format would be less conducive to expression and meaning-construction.

I decided to highlight feelings in my story, as the storyline clearly lent itself to building empathy. They were for the most part very engaged in this Workshop, and so I asked students to browse through their previous work, looking for themes by saying, “look for something that stands out or that you have written many times about.” I decided after reading Heffernan’s book, to encourage them to use any of their writing which included some journal and Writer’s Notebook entries, to look for themes in my students’ writing that would assist them in delving deeper into issues. My second workshop event was to explicitly guide my students towards finding recurring themes in their journals and in our discussions, as they have for the most part chosen to talk about issues that are very important to them. I knew it would be challenging for them to conceive of a topic without a springboard, and though I knew some of them might fall into the same ideas, I soon realized that they were very capable of deciding on what were their pressing issues.

During this first week of our workshop, I reviewed their past writing to look for some clue as to where to go next. Like Heffernan (2004), I found to a large extent, that most student writing has barely scraped the surface of the personal, without “interrupting or disrupting the commonplace” (p. 11). In all of my teaching, I have not seen that many pieces that have gone beyond the commonplace. As I read through one of my student’s past writing pieces, I contemplated how students are alienated through the mass media, which reproduces injustices and subdues the imagination. To the outside world, my students’ narratives may seem like nothing more than one-sentence retellings and not anywhere close to disrupting the commonplace, but in some of my students’ eyes, they are looking for answers to that which they need explained. Some of their writings are a testament to the meaning they are trying to make and to what they perceive to be unfair in their personal lives. As I reread their work, I realized that I had to move them forward in their personal and social narratives. I sensed that in my previous efforts to get them to write something, I wasn’t really concerned with what they were writing.

Emerging Significance of Student-Teacher Conferences

The conferences have been the most rewarding. The conversations that Zaragosa (2002) held with her students in her writer’s workshop conferences, I felt were very relevant and she outlined some crucially important features of writing with her students. I have taken a slightly different approach to these conversations, as I try to use similar comments and guiding questions but during different, yet appropriate moments throughout the day due to the chunking I need to do in order to have my students attend. I have found her comments to her own students to be very helpful, and I refer to them
occasionally, with the hopes that I will begin to take more ownership in that process by creating my own relevant questions and comments for my students. Lately, I have started using the conference more effectively by making it, as Heffernan & Lewison (2003) propose, a place for deeper discussions to take place, where we can together attempt to deconstruct the “problems in their common culture” (p. 437). I have the privilege of having extensive one-on-one time with my students, and so I have chosen to work largely on nurturing the eventual ability to “blend the personal and the social into narrative texts to explore social themes generated through class conversations and events” (Ibid.). In our first workshop series, the students mostly wrote about topics that were close to their hearts: the cherished dog that was given away, the sister who lives in foster care, the death of a friend’s father…and two students have written about playground incidents that involved issues of exclusion. Finally, a girl who is autistic, and who has up until this point only ever chosen to copy environmental print rather than write, created a story about the feelings associated with being away from her mother because her mother works at night. All of the students wrote with enthusiasm and determination in order to question their lives and the decisions that others have made for them. It was a good starting point.

Later writer’s workshop sessions demonstrated how to create engaging titles, draw story-related pictures and publishing. The students took a keen interest in publishing their work on a computer program called Storybook Weaver (2004), which also generates pre-made graphics. I hadn’t used it with this class in the past, but somehow we got caught in its web only to realize that my student’s lack of letter recognition abilities would impede the typing process. Worse yet, the selection of graphics appeared to be diverse, but is actually limited in scope and I feel that some of the images are questionable in regard to depictions of certain groups. Nevertheless, my students urged me to continue using the program at least this one time. My students continued to enjoy Author’s Chair, where they read their narratives to the rest of the class. We showcased their new and old work in a book launch that I felt would be very important in taking their work beyond the confines of the classroom, and might act as an empowering tool that could improve their self-concept. The book launch raised student self-concept and altered the school’s perceptions in the students’ abilities as writers.

Final Thoughts

I have thought critically about what had been missing in our writer’s workshop, and I have tried to find space for what Zaragosa (2002) refers to as the six fundamental aspects of any writing program: Time to write, control of topic choice, active student control, integration of sub-skills, the right to an audience, and the teacher-child conference (p. 40). In response to her suggestions, I made significant changes to my program, albeit with modifications taking into account my students’ capabilities. During the onset of our workshop, I did not believe my students were capable of “real” written work. These children did not fit neatly into categories or developmental continua that reflected their strengths and needs. I went into this believing that they needed to be able to print at least a few letters before pursuing communication in written form. But when that gave way to my understanding that writing is about the construction of meaning, my classroom became a writing place. I made inroads in giving students more ownership over their work. I too felt that “they realize that what they have to say, not only what the teacher assigns, is important” (Zaragosa, 2002, p. 40). They seem to know quite well in
which areas of their lives they have had little control (e.g., bullying, loss, death), and can come to their own understandings of the world. I agree with Zaragosa that students must have opportunities to have active student control, and I take this to mean, that the students in this class are writing about personally-relevant topics. That said, there is an added effort being exerted by me so that they can also start to write about socially-relevant topics.

With this particular class, the brainstorming, editing, revisions were all orally done, while trying to honour the students’ words and thought process. As a group, we tried Zaragosa’s T.A.G. strategy: tell what you like, ask questions, and give ideas, though we did so collectively during Author’s Chair so that I could provide prompts for them (2002, p. 42). This way, the students could provide feedback as a group to whoever was showing work. It worked beautifully, as they got enormous joy out of sharing their work. I felt that this group really has benefited from this sharing time, even though they did not have the opportunity to work in pairs for this part of the process.

I read purposeful, authentic and emotional pieces from my students after introducing the writer’s workshop. They were all more aware of the feelings that guided them, and the experiences that they wished to have and the challenges they faced every day. We talked a lot in our class; it was our strongest form of expression, and what I picked up most often from them was discontentment with peers, mostly at recess. I also recognized that as a class, we were still working in the realm of personal, rather than social narrative.

In their “social narratives”, Heffernan’s students shared their cultural resources to rewrite worlds taking into account the identities and obstacles they faced, used the written word to construct and analyze their common identities, and used writer’s workshop as a form of social action through its capacity to diffuse these messages (Heffernan & Lewison, 2003). I chose to find and use powerful books that were relevant to my students’ issues of exclusion, ability and belonging, with the hope that our readings would set the stage for writing that more fully captured the spirit of what they want to change in their school culture. I wanted students to write in more depth about social issues, and I believe that books that depict the passionate accounts of true and fictional triumphs and failures of the world’s inhabitants are conducive to this. It remains to be seen how they will create their meanings, develop their understandings, and deconstruct the relations that silence or give them voice, but I know that I can take an active role in engaging them in opportunities to analyze their experiences and lived texts. Because the classroom and the playground are a microcosm of our world, each with its own set of power relations and the resulting consequences on the children in my room (both as bullies and as targets), I went on a search for books to share with related and meaningful content. Heffernan and Lewison (2003) state that:

Social issues books are those that enrich our understanding of history and life by giving voice to those who have traditionally been silenced or marginalized. They make visible the social systems that attempt to maintain economic inequities. These books show how people can begin to take action on important social issues” (p. 17).
With each passing week, I became more optimistic and hopeful about what these children were bringing to their learning and to their world. This journey into writing has given impulse to deep structural changes to my program, and I have developed various areas of interest for the future that would come to bear on a more comprehensive understanding of writing and the writer’s workshop. The disruption to my practices so far has extended to all other areas in my teaching, but these have been positive disruptions, ones that challenge the commonplace of what has been my experience to date. I have reconsidered my position, and the students’ positions in relation to ability, ownership and student control, and reconsidered my instructional methods in order to make more visible for this writing collective, the gaps and the strengths of their stories. The outcome of this project has been about acquiring a more global vision of what I want students to accomplish in their writing lives. I draw to a close the first chapter of this experience, knowing fully that it is just the beginning. There are many issues and questions left to explore, some of them related to the nuances of craft lessons, the quest for various publishing formats and the exploration of potential modifications to self-and peer editing. I plan to continue upon this reflexive effort to establish more socially-meaningful practices in my work as a literacy teacher. In Heffernan’s words, I too have to “recognize and value the smallest increments of change – all despite a personal sense of urgency” (2004, p. 23). I have to be at ease knowing that the pace at which my students work will have to conduct my direction, but not the breadth of what I believe they are capable of writing.

References


