

EW and Writers Workshop... A Complementing Pair

Does Empowering Writers go hand in hand with the writers workshop model? The answer is a firm ABSOLUTELY!

I'll never forget the struggles that I experienced when asked to use the workshop model for the first time. Frustration! That is what I felt. I was asked to teach a ten minute mini lesson, engage all students in writing for thirty minutes, and create a community of writers all at the same time. The problem was, I did not know how to make this work, or even where to start. I struggled with several aspects.

- **Mini Lessons:** It was hard to find a lesson that would benefit the entire class and keep students writing individually for 30 minutes. Hours were spent trying to find the "perfect" lessons (time that I did not have), and it usually took a lot longer than ten minutes to teach.
- **Writing time:** I had a hard time keeping the students engaged in the writing process for thirty minutes each day. They wrote for 30 minutes, but their papers were less than desirable.
- **Individual Student Conferences:** I was able to conference with two (or maybe three) writers on a lucky day. Meanwhile, neglecting the other 20 students.
- **Free choice:** Giving students free choice was a challenge because I found it hard to manage.
- **Building a Community of Writers:** I didn't know how to create a community of writers, and quite frankly, I didn't know what this was supposed to look like.

Things changed when I was given the opportunity to attend an Empowering Writers Professional Development workshop focusing on the expository genre. Through this training, I was exposed to a methodology that was missing in my classroom. I learned to break writing into manageable chunks and teach isolated skills before trying to write an entire piece. The cornerstone of the EW methodology, modeling, was missing entirely from my teaching.

Methodology of Empowering Writers:

- **INTRODUCE the concept or skill through the use of published examples.** I learned how to intentionally make the reading / writing connection with every lesson.
- **MODELING:** I learned that I needed to model the writing process in front of students in an authentic way. Prior to EW, this rarely happened. It became clear to me that this was critical part of writing instruction.

- **GUIDED PRACTICE:** After modeling objective driven lessons, I guided practice by conferencing with individual students. This was also a time that I shared exemplary writing created by students.
- **APPLICATION:** Naturally, the skills taught started emerging in student writing in meaningful ways.

The main goal of the first few month of lessons, was to teach each isolated skill with fidelity. For example; the first skill taught was organization. Time was spent on teaching genre and organization through the annotation process. By the end of this skill, students were able to recognize introductions, conclusions, distinct main ideas, and powerful supporting details. They gained the knowledge needed to recognize what great organization looked like. We progressed skill by skill across a few months of objective driven instruction.

After teaching the salient skills with fidelity, the students now had the knowledge base of each skill or the “meat” of writing. Students had a deeper understanding of what good writing looked like and they were able to produce it. It was at this time that the structure of my room changed to the traditional writers workshop model which looked like the following.

- **Mini Lesson:** Each workshop started off with a ten minute mini lesson mainly taken from the vast array of activities from the expository guide. I no longer had to waste precious time searching for lessons.
- **Writing Time:** Students were able to write for thirty minutes or more each day and their stamina was better than ever! They were focused because they now had the foundational skills to apply in their writing.
- **Free Choice:** Students were given free choice of writing pieces. It was easy to manage because they all had the knowledge base to complete the writing process. This made them much more independent writers.
- **Individual Student Conferences:** I was able to conference with students on a much deeper level because they understood the skills. Discussions were based on the application of skills learned and the bonus - we were speaking the same language. The language of authors.
- **Community of Writers:** The knowledge they had gained from the first part of the year informed the discussions we had as a class and with each other as peers. Students also celebrated successes weekly.

Now, students were able to understand how all of the skills fit together in a holistic rubric as such.

| CATEGORY | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
|---------------------------------------|--|--|--|--|
| Organization | <p>Introduction, body, conclusion</p> <p>Distinct main ideas</p> <p>Powerful supporting details</p> <p>Clear focus</p> <p>Strong connection and linking words</p> | <p>Introduction, body, conclusion</p> <p>Distinct main ideas</p> <p>A number of supporting details</p> <p>Clear focus</p> <p>Some connections and linking words</p> | <p>Shows a beginning, middle, and end, but the body is in random order</p> <p>Vague or overlapping main ideas</p> <p>Lack of focus</p> <p>No apparent connections and linking words</p> | <p>Shows no organizational strategy and is hard to follow</p> <p>No clear focus due to the lack of main ideas and related supporting details</p> |
| Introduction | <p>Compelling lead</p> <p>Topic clearly stated with main ideas skillfully identified</p> | <p>Adequate lead</p> <p>Topic sentence names topic and adequately states main ideas</p> | <p>Lacks a compelling lead</p> <p>Attempts to name topic, but main ideas are vague, unclear, and/or unstated</p> | <p>Lacks a clear introduction</p> <p>Very brief</p> |
| Main Idea | <p>Clearly stated broad yet distinct main ideas</p> <p>Interesting word choice and sentence variety</p> | <p>Clearly stated broad yet distinct main ideas</p> <p>Some evidence of interesting word choice and sentence variety</p> | <p>Overly general main ideas</p> <p>Main ideas might be stated in a redundant fashion</p> | <p>Main ideas not included</p> <p>Reader is left wondering what the piece is about</p> |
| Supporting Details | <p>Specific, powerful details clearly focused on the topic</p> <p>Details are fully elaborated using the productive questions</p> | <p>A mix of general and specific details focused on the topic</p> <p>Details are elaborated using the productive questions</p> | <p>Some general details focused on the topic</p> <p>Details are stated as facts, but not developed with the productive questions</p> | <p>Few general details that may or may not be linked to the topic</p> |
| Conclusion | <p>Conclusion paragraph has creatively restated main ideas using a variety of techniques</p> | <p>Conclusion paragraph restates main ideas</p> | <p>Ends abruptly with minimal attempt to restate the main ideas</p> | <p>Lacks a conclusion or provides a vague concluding sentence</p> |
| Vocabulary, fluency, mechanics | <p>Precise and appropriate vocabulary</p> <p>Thorough understanding of mechanics with few errors in spelling, usage, punctuation, or capitalization</p> <p>Fluent response</p> | <p>Adequate vocabulary</p> <p>Average understanding of mechanics with adequate spelling, punctuation, capitalization, or usage</p> <p>Errors do not interfere with the readability</p> | <p>Simplistic and general vocabulary</p> <p>Incomplete understanding of mechanics with frequent errors in spelling, punctuation, capitalization, or usage</p> <p>Errors affect the readability</p> | <p>Vague and inappropriate vocabulary</p> <p>Frequent errors in spelling, punctuation, capitalization, or usage</p> <p>Difficult to read or understand</p> |

Let's recap a bit. For the first several months, skills were taught in isolation. Every lesson was objective driven following the Empowering Writers methodology mentioned above. After a few short months, the traditional writers workshop was possible because of the knowledge base of my students.

The progress was phenomenal! It was not uncommon for students to jump from a holistic score of 2 to a commended score of 3 or 4. Students that were hardly writing at the first part of year became proficient in a short amount of time. But the most exciting part was that students were engaged in the process and truly learned the love of writing for a lifetime!

An effective writers workshop model can and should be built on a foundation of skill development with plenty of opportunity for students to practice. So, does writers workshop work? Based on my experience as outlined above, it most certainly does!

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Present: Certified Empowering Writers Trainer

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