

How You Can Make the Most Out of a 45 Minute Writing Period

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Teaching Context

Our teaching context is a self-contained third grade classroom of 25 students. Of those students there are 11 girls and 14 boys. One student, who moved to America in December from Italy, is enrolled in the English as a Second Language program, while two other students have exited the program yet attend once a week on a monitoring basis for writing. Four students are receiving Title 1 reading services and one out of the five qualified this year for Title 1 math. Five students attend an enrichment class once a week. Two students receive speech and language services. One student in the class also works with the school counselor once a week.

Our writing period runs from 12:45 until 1:30. It begins right after lunch and ends just before recess. We usually spend about 15-20 minutes with a whole group mini-lesson, and then allow the remainder of the period as a time for students to work on the skill presented in the mini lesson independently and silently at their desks or at another spot in the room.

The Original Writing Period

As far as our normal writing period is concerned, we both had not been pleased with the current routine we had transpired within the classroom at the beginning of the year. The students usually had, at most, twenty minutes to write, and that was on a good day. There were many days where they were left with only ten minutes to work on their writing assignment. Furthermore, the students struggled to work silently during this period. There were those students in our class who would rush through the process,

simply dumping words onto paper that happened to fit the mold for that day. Then they ran up to the closest adult to see if it was “correct.” On the other side of the coin were those students who would not even give themselves a chance to brainstorm. If an idea did not come to them by the time they were back in their seats, their hand flew into the air, waving in frustration for an adult to come by and help them get started. We had an image of a writing period quite the opposite of what was currently being displayed in our classroom.

Our goal for the students was to slow down and give themselves a chance to brainstorm ideas before rushing into the assignment. We wanted students to take a breath and relax when writing. We wanted them to depend upon the adults in the room much less and begin looking towards each other for help and advice. Ideally, our goal was to set up writing conferences in a small group atmosphere where students would work together and help each other throughout the writing process. Throughout most of the year, none of this was occurring and the writing period was proving to be extremely draining for the teachers and frustrating for the students. We knew this was clearly an area which deserved our attention, and we intended to find a solution to the madness that would foster a love for writing in our students, and develop a more complete and comprehensive program for writing that we would feel confident in embracing.

Wonderings or Ideas

As teachers, we are continually striving to discover, reach, and then teach to the needs of every child in the classroom by inquiring about our effective usage of teaching methods and curriculum materials. Throughout our yearlong teaching and learning experience together, we have encompassed the concept of “teacher research” and have

embraced the notion that teachers learn as much from their students as students do from their teachers. When we began this project, we collectively had several initial wonderings about the writing process. We wondered if by changing the set up of our writing period, could we improve students' writing behavior and reduce bad writing habits? Would introducing a form of Writer's Workshop encourage students to become more independent writers? Would they begin to rely on their fellow classmates more for ideas and help, as opposed to only the teachers and other adults in the room? If students were to work in a small group setting, would they develop good editing skills and conferencing skills, as well as develop the skills they need to go back and revise their own work? Most importantly, will the children start to see themselves as true writers, with their own personal writing voices and strengths?

Kate Writes About "The Idea"

It was extremely difficult for me to find something I considered myself "passionate" about. My mentor and I talked about a few different possibilities as to the direction we could go for our inquiry project and even began traveling down a couple paths before we found the perfect fit for both of us.

When it comes to writing, I have never especially enjoyed the subject, neither through my schooling years, nor my recent time as an educator. I have never felt strong about my own abilities as a writer, and therefore did not feel confident or capable of teaching the subject to my students. Writing is extremely subjective, and therefore I find it both difficult to teach and to grade. Inquiring into the other subjects is something I believe I will always do naturally within my career. Math and reading are both stressed subjects and are vital to every student's future. I know I will always be trying to find

ways to improve in strategies for teaching both of these subjects. As far as social studies and science, those are two subjects of which I naturally have a passion for. I enjoy teaching and planning for them. I naturally try to find new ways of presenting the material in a manner that will best fit the needs of all my students. However, writing has been a subject that has taken a back burner on my list of priorities. It is a subject I have little passion for, and often find myself simply giving the students the directions for that day and sending them off to free write. This is an area I do not feel I will necessarily take the initiative in improving without some sort of extra push behind me, which is why writing is a perfect fit for my inquiry project.

Furthermore, as an intern I am always thinking about the future; how I will set up my own classroom and structure each of the subjects. Writing is a period which I feel I have learned very little about in my courses at Penn State. I feel as though I have a good idea how I should set up my reading and math periods, as well as how I would like to teach science and social studies, but when it comes to the writing period, I am clueless. How can I make sure my students get the most out of their writing time? Through this project I am hoping to find the answer to that question, and as a result feel very confident when developing my plans for writing next year. I want to walk away from this project filled with wonderful new ideas for how to structure the block of time I set aside to dedicate to writing. I also hope that as a result of spending so much time immersed in writing, a stronger passion for the subject will be awoken within me. I do not like my current attitude towards the writing period, and hope this project will prove to eliminate the helplessness I have felt throughout the year. I want to become a stronger writing teacher and display genuine enthusiasm and knowledge when teaching the subject.

Michele writes about “The Idea”

Personally, writing is a passion for me and comes to me with ease. Throughout my youth, I could always be found with a pencil and pad of paper, writing short stories or poetry. I would tingle with excitement when I found just the right way to turn a verse or describe a scene. There was never a poetry contest left unentered or a thesaurus page left unturned. I even convinced my mother to buy me a typewriter for Christmas, eager to be one of the youngest novelists ever. Because writing came so naturally to me, I thought that teaching others to write would be natural as well. *If I love it so much, I know I can instill the same in others.*

However, in the five years I have been teaching, finding effective ways to instruct my students in writing has been challenging. In those five years I have changed grade levels three times. Knowing what to teach in writing, when to teach a particular concept or skill, and what the best teaching practice would be has been a focus for me. Writing looks different at different grade levels and I want to do what is best for my students.

I know that children need to be taught how to come up with writing ideas. I know that children need direction on how to incorporate ideas from the “experts” – the authors whose books they read from the library or bookstore. I know that children need good models to know how to revise and edit their work. I know all of these things and have taught children lessons about how to do them. However, I haven’t always felt successful with these lessons. Success, for me, comes when a child can do these things on his/her own. More often than not, my students can imitate the strategies that I teach them initially, but fall back on me to help them work through these skills again during another piece of writing. So, how do I get them to do it on their own? How can I help my

students carry these skills over different writing genres and apply them to different applications?

Through working on this project with Kate, I am hoping that we can devise a plan and implement some strategies that incorporate the curriculum we need to teach while helping our students become more independent and resourceful yet collaborative writers.

Learning From the Experts

According to Ralph Fletcher and Joann Portalupi, acclaimed figures in the world of teaching writing and authors of *Craft Lessons* (1998), “there is no Miracle-Gro for growing young writers.” Though we as teachers know this to be true, we often can’t help but dream of a magical solution that will produce the strongest writers, fragrant with sweet descriptive language and blossoming with brilliant story plots. What we do know are several truths about teaching children how to write that will help facilitate a productive writing environment – an environment that, in turn, will help foster a garden of independent, budding writers. Fletcher and Portalupi state four writing “beliefs” that form the foundation for a successful writing program.

Writing needs to occur on a daily basis. “Students need regular, sustained time to write... If we try to squeeze it in, well, students will feel the squeeze and their writing will suffer accordingly.” Children need to be given direction or a focus in the form of a mini-lesson and an opportunity to share what they’ve written with others for feedback. However, the most crucial time in writing is the time that happens in between. It’s the time we give students to craft their piece. It’s the time we give students to take writing risks. It’s the time we give students put down on paper their thoughts and ideas. Time

must be planned into the writing period for sustained writing. Sporadic moments here and there throughout the week won't work.

Writers need to have response. A dialogue must occur between teacher and student. Reggie Routman, author of many books on the role of language arts in the elementary classroom, devoted a whole book to the "conversations" that happen within the classroom. In her book, appropriately titled *Conversations* (2000), Routman states that "...all learning involves conversation. That conversation may be with ourselves, between ourselves and an author's words on the page, with a colleague, with a mentor, with an apprentice, with a student ... Always, conversations play a major role in my think, learning, teaching, and changing." Conversing with students through writers meetings or conferences gives the teacher the opportunity to celebrate a child's successes with a particular skill or concept, seek to understand the child's intent, and/or give advice to a struggling child in need of ideas. Meaningful dialogue will give a child a true sense of a reader's response to what he or she has written.

Writers need to take responsibility. Students need to have a sense of ownership in and responsibility to what they write. This includes taking the time to edit and revise the work they've done. This includes making choices as to what should or should not be included in a particular piece of writing. But choice must come with guidance from a teacher. Too much choice without teacher direction can lead to a lacking piece of writing.

Writers need to be exposed to literature. While literature is the foundation for establishing a classroom of readers, the same can be said for setting up a classroom of writers. We learn by example. What better way to introduce students to the power of a

strong lead or a surprise ending then to share with students what the “experts” do? Reading and rereading a text is crucial. “Young readers who read and reread vibrant texts can start viewing themselves as insiders in the authoring cycle. They understand that like themselves professional authors struggle, get stuck, and make decisions in sharing their texts” (Fletcher and Portalupi, 1998).

In his book *A Fresh Look At Writing* (1994), Donald Graves mentions two more conditions for an effective writing time, not yet addressed. Simply stated, *students need to write about what they know*. When students are passionate about what they write and have a true interest in the topic, it shows in their writing. *Expectations for all writers need to be high in order to foster success*. Setting high expectations show students that you care and, most importantly, that you feel they can reach those expectations.

With a strong foundation for our writing program, it is our hope that we can improve the quality of student writing and the writing atmosphere to produce blooming beginning writers.

Our Inquiry Plan

In order to improve our writing period we decided to experiment with writing groups. We knew we wanted to split the class into four groups, each of us taking two and hoping to spend time with both groups every day. However, we knew we could not just jump into this new plan; we would need to take several steps in order to transition both ourselves and the students into this new set-up.

Our first step was to simply changing the routine of sharing time. Before starting our inquiry project, there was little time for students’ to share their work and it would occur on random days. We now made a conscious effort to give students a chance to

share throughout the week, hopefully at the end of the writing period, and if we did not get to it that day we would allow time at the beginning of the next day. The amount of time dedicated to sharing would vary depending on the context. Some days we would select a small number of students to share a particular section of their writing, such as their lead, a couple detail sentences, or their closing. On these days sharing would take up more time than those where we would have only one student read a particularly strong section of their writing in order to set an example for the rest of the class. Other days, sharing time would take up a large portion of the writing period. We would pair students and allow them as much time as they needed to share with a partner what they had currently completed for their piece of writing.

Sharing time became much more effective when we focused students on a particular goal. Before someone shared their work, Michele or Kate would give the rest of the class something to listen for. For example, when a student was sharing their poem about a tree, the rest of the class was told to listen for the student's use of personification. After the student shared the class was asked to provide one example of how that tree was given human characteristics. By focusing students' attention during sharing time, and providing more chances for students to share their work, students began to see the time as an opportunity to listen to each other's ideas and writing samples, as opposed to a time where it was simply about sharing their own work.

We did not immediately make any other adjustments to the writing period itself in order to collect some baseline data. We maintained the current structure of the period, where students were working around the room and writing independently. During these days we kept records of who was asking for help, how often they were asking for help,

and which students were off task during the period. Once we obtained a few days worth of data from the current writing schedule, we began to take a steps towards our goal.

The second step in our project was to simply bring more order and structure to the writing period. Our first attempt at quieting and calming writing time was by taking an entire period and telling students on that day they had to work completely independently and silently. When Michele sent students back to their seats, she informed them that both she and Kate would be working on their own writing piece, and today they should do the same. Neither of us would be available to take questions about their writing, unless they needed clarification about the assignment. It was a day where they were forced to rely on themselves entirely.

Previously during our writing periods, we both would be swarmed with students from the first minute they were sent to their seats to work, up until they were sent outside for recess. We found that after spending fifteen minutes on a specific skill in the mini-lesson and then assigning their work for the day, students would immediately approach us claiming they did not understand what they were supposed to do, or they did not know where to start. This became a pattern for a number of students, and we were constantly running from one student's desk to another trying to help everyone who demanded our attention. In order to eliminate that problem, we thought if students were given a day where they could not approach us for help, but had to rely on their own instincts and writing ideas, maybe they would realize their own potential. In many students, we had become a crutch they could lean on, and in most of those cases we were a crutch being used to aid an unwounded leg.

That day writing went much more smoothly and we found ourselves not feeling completely drained when going outside to recess. Surprisingly, not one student protested that day's set-up; they all busied themselves immediately and got to work. Every once in awhile a student would approach one of us to show us what they had so far in their poem, wanting us to confirm they were headed in the right direction, but no student asked for assistance getting started or claimed to have writers block. It seemed when students knew we were working on the same poem ourselves, and were not going to holding their hand through the poem writing process, they took it upon themselves to produce their poetry on their own, and did a fantastic job. We even had time for students to share their work at the end of the period, and many students were itching at the chance to share the poem they had written completely on their own. No one seemed shy or hesitant to read their poem to their classmates even though they did not have the teacher support they were used to. It really showed us that our students do have the confidence in themselves to trust in their own writing, and our efforts to improve the period would benefit the students as well as ourselves.

Once we saw the success of this simple change, we knew it was time to begin reconstructing the entire period. Fortunately we were just finishing our poetry unit at the time, and beginning a unit on narrative writing. To accompany the social studies unit on Native Americans, we began focusing our writing lessons on how to create a legend of our own. For the first week of the new unit, we kept instruction as a whole class activity. However, we changed the nature of the independent work time. This was the third step in the reconstruction process. Prior to our research, we would have our mini lesson and then send students off to work on the skill. If a student happened to complete that day's

assignment early, we would allow them to work ahead on the writing piece. For example, in the beginning of the year we had students creating fictional stories. One day we held a mini lesson on how to create a “lively lead” and then sent students to work. If a student finished their lead in their story, we allowed them to begin the middle of their story. This resulted in some students finishing their entire stories early and then having nothing to work on for future mini lessons, while others were still working on the first few sentences of their piece. Students began creating new stories of their own nature. Some students would have four or five stories under their belt, while others were still working their first. Having the class at such varying levels made it extremely difficult to keep them all on track, working on the same skill. We knew when we began this new unit, we did not want our writing period to run in the same manner.

We began by simply discussing the different parts of a legend and allowed students time to explore various legends with a partner, looking for those specific parts. We spent two days on this as an introduction, which provided students with the opportunity to become familiar with legends, something we felt they would benefit greatly from as they created their own legend. On the third day, we gave students a chance to brainstorm various topics for their legend. This day consisted of students creating a list of different natural occurrences they could explain through their legend. Some students chose topics such as why turtles have shells, why dogs bark, or why dogs do not have fur on their stomachs. On the fourth day, students selected the topic they were going to focus on as well as who the main character would be in their legend. Once students knew the subject of their legend, they began constructing multiple reasons for this natural occurrence. On this day the writing period took a very interesting turn.

While students were working, there were a handful who were struggling to come up with new ideas, and were losing focus during the period. We each took a few students and worked with them at a table. At Kate's table there were originally only two students working with her. However, two other classmates naturally joined the discussion, eager to listen to each other's ideas and provide their own input as to why their classmate's subject might look, or act the way it does. This was the first time we had any sort of group meeting during our writing period, and it was extremely exciting to see how it unfolded. Students were anxious to receive suggestions from their classmates and to help each other. As we saw the success of the small groups of students working together, Michele decided to have the rest of the class join in the discussion. She asked all students to turn to classmate nearby and share the ideas they had so far. Students were then able to work in these partners both as an outlet to share what they had come up with, and as a support to help them come up with new ideas. It was wonderful to see students taking each other's suggestions seriously and see some of them adding new ideas to their lists.

On each of these days, the free writing period was much more focused than it had ever been before in our class. We had the students concentrating on a very specific skill, and only that skill. At the suggestion of Mindy Cocolin, a language arts specialist in the State College School District, every day students were only working on one step of the process, keeping everyone at the same pace. Both our strongest and our weakest writers were working on the same part of their legend. We had broken the writing process up into very small steps and would walk through each step together as a class. If a student happened to finish early, then they would free write another story or legend, but they could not move further within their first legend; that legend is one where we moved

through as one body. When students began developing their main character, that was all they worked on that day. They did not begin writing their legend, nor did they work on the setting. They only focused upon their main character's traits. When students were working on creating a "lively lead" that was the only part of the story they were to write. They wrote the introduction to their legend, and then could free write if they had finished. Sharing time changed in this manner as well. When students had completed their lively leads, they were able to share their leads, and only their leads.

Our sharing time became even more focused than before. As opposed to students sharing their entire piece of writing, they now shared only a portion of it. Whatever part of the legend we were working on that particular day, was what they would share with the class. After spending the previous day working on leads, we selected three students who wished to share what they had completed so far. Those students read only their lead to their classmates. Students were then given the opportunity to tell those who shared what they enjoyed about the lead, as well as offer suggestions.

When the entire process was finished, students could share their whole story. By sharing only small pieces of their legend, it also helped keep students in suspense until they end. They are not hearing the same stories over and over again, but rather small portions of each other's work. They can look forward to finishing their own legend, as well as their classmates finishing their legends in order to hear the stories from start to finish.

The fourth step in our project was to set up the small groups. Once we began working on the legends in more detail, we divided the class into two groups to start. We still taught our mini lessons as a whole group, but then split the class as they were

working on the skill. That way we were only responsible for certain students, which breaks up the class and can lower our own stress levels. Instead of having 25 students to check in on, we only had 12 or 13. These two groups of students were not divided based upon ability, but rather a mix of students. By dividing the class in this manner, we hoped the struggling writers could hear the ideas and thought processes of the stronger writers, providing a model for them to follow.

When students were split into the two groups, they worked on opposite sides of the room. Students in Michele's group sat in a small circle on the carpet in the front of the room, writing on lapboards, while those in Kate's group sat in a circle around a table in the back of the room, some students writing on the table, and others writing on lapboards. While working in these smaller groups, we were able to set the tone for how we wished writing to proceed from this point on. Students were able to share their ideas while working, and able to help each other when a student was struggling with an idea. Students were allotted certain times where they could openly share as a group, times where they could share with a partner, and times where they were working silently. Kate's group began sharing as a whole group, but found it more effective when students were paired for sharing and helping. Students were given roughly five minutes of "open discussion," a time for pair-sharing/helping, and five minutes where the discussion was closed and they were to work silently. This created a nice balance between discussing their legends and problems they were having, and applying each other's ideas to their work. Without closing the discussion, students were not spending enough time writing down the ideas they were generating. They were so eager to talk with each other that the

discussion would continue on for unnecessary lengths of time. Ultimately we wanted students to help each other come up with ideas, not write each other's stories.

The fifth step in our process was to further subdivide the two groups. Originally, we planned to take the two groups we had made, and split each in half based upon their ability level in writing. This would result in two high/medium ability writing groups and two medium/low ability writing groups. However, after spending a couple writing periods working with students based upon their needs, we found this to be much more effective and continued to set-up the period in this manner.

On the first day where students were to begin their lead, there were still six students who were not finished with their story maps. Michele pulled those students to a table in an effort to catch them up, while Kate wandered around the rest of the room to help students begin their leads. On the second day some students were "finished" their lead, whereas five students were still struggling to complete their story map and had yet to begin their lead. Michele took the group of students who were ready to peer edit their leads to a table in the back of the room, and Kate pulled the students who were continuing to work on their story maps to a table in the front of the room. The rest of the class, who were continuing to create their leads, remained at their seats, or somewhere else in the room to work silently on their legend. We both felt comfortable with the arrangement of pulling students based upon their needs, as opposed to creating the groups and meeting with them as we saw fit. On this particular day, three of the five students completed their story maps and began their lead, proving this arrangement to help keep students on the same track. This is the most striking difference between our writing

period in the beginning of the year, to that of the current one: we could now address the writing needs of every student in our classroom.

Data Collection

We began the data collection process by surveying our students. It was our hope that the frustrations the students were feeling, if any, were the same that we were having. Starting from a common ground would be helpful to us. We were also curious to how the children viewed themselves as writers and their knowledge of the writing process. As a conclusion to the project we plan on giving the students a similar survey again, asking them the same questions in order to compare these results to those from the first survey.

Survey questions

We asked the students a series of questions stated below, paying close attention to state the questions in a developmentally appropriate way for our third graders. In the following questions, students were asked to rate their answers on a scale of 1 to 5.

- How do you feel about writing time in E-5? (number 5 being “love it”)
- How do you feel about yourself as a writer? (number 5 being “I am a great writer and proud of my work”)

Students were also asked to categorize their most enjoyable parts of the writing process from 1 to 6 (number 1 being “favorite”).

- Brainstorming alone or with the class
- Teachers show the class a skill or teach a writing lesson
- Silent writing
- Editing (looking over my work, checking spelling, capitalization, and punctuation)
- Sharing my writing with the class, small group, or partner
- Writing with a partner

We also wanted to know what students do when they get stuck – ask a teacher, ask a friend, or try to work it out alone. Three open-ended questions were asked, including:

- Is there anything that we don't do during writing that you would like to do?
- What is your favorite thing about writing?
- What is your least favorite thing about writing?

After reviewing the data, we began to see a few patterns among the answers that we could use within our project. Most students felt “okay” about our writing time, rating the writing time as a 3 or 4 on the scale. Similarly, students felt they were average writers, rating themselves as a 3 or 4 on the scale. Most children wanted to have more time devoted to sharing ideas with a partner, small group, or the whole class and were eager to co-write something with a friend. Most students rated “editing and revising their writing” as a “6” on the 1-6 scale. A few students wrote that the one thing they disliked the most was the amount of time spent on a mini-lesson by the teachers, stating that it takes a long time. In response to the above question, one student wrote, “When it takes about 25 minutes for the teacher to explain writing and we don't have a lot of time to write.” Other students made some suggestions when asked to respond to the following question: Is there anything that we don't do during writing that you would like to do? Some answers included writing more poetry, starting with a free writing period, and brainstorming more ideas with a partner before meeting as a class. We made several conclusions from these surveys and felt confident we could implement a few changes. We thought the children needed a chance to work more in small groups and with a partner during our writing time to brainstorm, share ideas, and work through writing dilemmas. We thought that student choice may also be an avenue to explore. Finally, we felt strongly that the children needed more time to write during our writing period.

After our review of the survey data, we began to collect information during the writing period. We kept a chart of information on all of the students. We kept track of where they worked in the room, how often they became distracted during the period, as well as how often they asked for help and how long that help was given. These data charts were kept throughout the entire inquiry project in order to see how recordings changed during the experimental processes. At the end of each writing period, we would write down a few notes about how the period ran as a whole. If students seemed to be noisy that day, or the period was a bit chaotic, we would make a quick note of that. On the other hand, if things seemed to run smoothly and students appeared enthusiastic and engaged, we also made a note of that. We also kept track of how long students had to write each day at the top of the sheet.

A third way we collected data was through the students' work. We took a careful look at their writing samples from the beginning of the project and some samples at the end of the project and compared the two. Through this we were able to see if the students' writing improved. We could see how well they applied the skills taught through our mini lessons, and if their writing became more detailed and focused.

Lastly, we kept data through Kate's journal entries. When something important occurred during writing, such as making a significant adjustment to the period, Kate would record this in writing for that week. At the end of the project, these journals were something we could look back at for additional notes and comments about the project.

Data Analysis

We began analyzing the data in the very beginning of our plan by reviewing the surveys students had completed. We looked to find what the most popular parts of

writing were, and what seemed to be the least popular. By studying these surveys, we were able to see what parts of writing the students were enjoying, and which elements needed the most attention. It was also a wonderful way to hear some of the students' ideas about writing and what they would like to see during the period. By studying these surveys, we were able to get a good baseline reading of the success of the current structure to our writing period from the students' perspective, which is just as important as the teacher's. If students are uncomfortable or dissatisfied with the routine of a subject, then they cannot work to their potential. When working to improve your classroom, it is vital that you keep in mind the opinion of your students as well as your own. The ideal classroom encompasses a compromise between the teacher and the student whenever possible.

Towards the middle of our project, we began to look over our data sheets from the beginning of the project up until the most recent. At this point we had just begun to divide the students into two groups, and therefore wanted to make sure our project was headed in the right direction. By reviewing our data here, we could see if there seemed to be some improvement to the writing period, if there was no improvement, or if we were only making writing worse. Improvement was clearly seen within the "Off Task" column. The marks in this column had dropped significantly as we made the adjustments to the period, proving us to be on the right track.

Data....

We also looked over each of the columns on the data sheet to see who was asking for help, who was receiving help without asking, who was off task and also checked the

additional comments column. We were also able to compare the additional notes added to the back of the sheets.

To begin this task, we laid out all the data sheets in order from the beginning of the project to the most recent and compared each of the columns to each other. We compared the number of checks or letters in each of the columns overall, and then looked more closely at each of the students to see if any individual students had been noticeably effected by the change to our routine. From this point we were able to determine if we should continue in the same direction, or whether further adjustments should be made.

Towards the final steps of our project, we reviewed our data charts once again. By this time we had divided students into their four groups and had been working in our small conferences. We looked through all the data charts from the earliest stages of the project through to the end and again compared them across the different columns. Just as we did before, we looked for differences within the number of checks or letters within the columns, and then compared individual student differences. We went through this step again because we wanted to get a good feel for the final outcome of our adjustment to writing. We were able to see clearly any changes that had occurred to our writing period, no matter how small or large.

At this point we pulled out the students' legends and compared them to earlier samples of their writing. By taking this step we were able to see any growth that had occurred during our project, not just throughout the year. We did not pull out samples from the beginning of the year, because we felt any growth between the beginning of the year and now could not be directly linked to our project. The majority of students' writing skills developed over the course of third grade regardless of our project. Any

growth that occurred throughout the year most likely was a result of the students' own development as third graders, and had no link to our project itself. For this reason, we wanted to sample students' work within that 2 month period in order to search for growth within this shortened period, which may not have occurred without our project. By limiting the writing samples to those most closely falling within the 2 month course of our inquiry, we were able to clearly see development occurring during our project itself, and any significant jumps students might have made, or any small developments that may have occurred. If students made progress over the 2 month course of our project, it has a higher chance of being related to our alterations, than those made over the course of the entire year.

Students had written a story about a lost puppy back in January, before we began our Inquiry Project. This was the most recent example of creative writing, and therefore the most logical one to use as a comparison to their legends. We compared students' leads, details, events, and endings in order to see if there had been improvement. We also looked for the basic mechanics of writing: spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. We also looked to see if students kept in mind the different skills taught through mini lessons: varying sentence length, use of complex sentences, details in their description, a clear flow of events, as well as a beginning and an ending. After all, the ultimate goal of making writing time more effective was to hopefully make the students stronger writers themselves.

Lastly, we surveyed the students once again about the writing period. We handed out the same surveys as before in order to compare the results to the first survey. When comparing these surveys we looked at each questions' average result. We first compiled

all the surveys, and compared the answers to each question and found a median throughout the class. We did this for the first set of surveys and the second. Then we were able to compare the results of each and see any changes in the class' attitude towards writing.

What We Have Learned

Claim A: *Students are applying ideas from our lessons more often and to a greater extent.*

Earlier in the school year students would seem engaged and enthusiastic about our lessons and the writing skills we were introducing, but when they returned to their seats to free write, we were not seeing any evidence of our lessons within their writing. Students would sit down and resort back to their old habits of writing. Their stories continued to begin with “Once upon a time...” or “Once there was a girl named...” Despite the days we spent discussing different strategies of beginning a story, students continued to stick with what they were familiar with.

In January, students wrote narrative stories about a young girl who loses her puppy in the park (Appendix B). When reviewing our selected samples we noticed all three out of the four students began their story with “Once there was a little girl,” or “There once was a little girl.” The fourth student began his story with “A young girl named Jennifer.” Clearly all four students did not apply the information from the mini lesson about leading into a story.

However, reviewing the leads to the same four students legends, there is a remarkable difference (Appendix B). Only one of the four students continued to begin

his story with “Once upon a time.” The other three students found extremely original ways to write just their opening sentence.

Between the four students, perhaps the most amazing differences are within the writing samples of Student D and Student A. Both students began with similar writing styles: very straightforward and to the point. Each sentence was merely there to introduce a new fact about a character, or a new event in the story. As you read through each sentence, it is very obvious that the sentences are there to carry you through the story. As you continue to read, the sentences move you forward in time. Neither student put in sentences in order to add more detail or description. Both writers were using their words to only move the reader through the events. At no point in their leads does either of the students use a sentence to build suspense, the scene, or the character.

When looking at the same two students’ leads to their legends, the difference is incredible. The difference between the opening sentences in the two stories clearly demonstrates how the students were applying the knowledge gained from the lessons on leads. As you read on, you can also see the function of the sentences change dramatically as well. The writers still use the sentences to carry the reader through the events, but the pacing has slowed dramatically. Both students are now taking the time to pause and really describe the setting before carrying the reader through it. In Student D’s first writing sample, by the time he wrote the third sentence, his character had already traveled from home, to the pet store, and then to the park, without ever once describing a single detail about the setting. When looking at Student D’s second writing sample, by the third sentence the character is just on his way from his home to his “favorite cactus.” Within these three sentences he has added colorful adjectives that really create a beautiful visual

for the reader. Without ever once saying the location of his legend, he has made it obvious that it takes place in a desert.

The same may be said for Student A's work. Student A was already using some detail within her writing, but has clearly grown to use it to a much more powerful extent within her second sample. She never directly mentions the setting either, yet it is evident where her legend takes place as well.

By studying these four students writing samples, it was evident to us how much more effective our lessons have become. Students are now actually taking that knowledge and using it within their own stories and creations. Before it seemed they would merely return to their seats and forget what had been discussed and demonstrated five minutes earlier. Now students go to work on their own stories imagining ways to incorporate those lessons and adapt them to best fit their own writing styles.

Claim B: *Students have become more independent writers.*

Writing was such a draining subject because students used to depend so heavily upon the teachers and other adults in the room to help them. When they were stuck, asking a classmate for help was never a thought that would enter their minds. Students would stand in line waiting to talk to the next available adult in order to help them come up with ideas, begin their story, end their story, or edit their story. As a result of our inquiry this climate of frustration and chaos has changed dramatically.

When examining the records we kept on student behavior during writing, the first thing we noticed was the difference in students' off task behavior (Appendix C). Over the first 5 days of data collection, there were an average of 7 students who were

noticeably off task every day, whether they were talking, staring into space, or doodling on their paper. Some days we had as many as nine students become noticeably off task during the writing period. After we began dividing the class into groups during the period, we averaged only 1 student off task during the writing period. This could be said to be due to us working with smaller groups of students, but within those 5 days, we had 2 days where students were not working in groups, but at their seats or around the room independently. On April 25, 2 students engaged in noticeably off task behavior, and on April 26, there were no students who were visibly off task. This data further supports our claim of students becoming more independent. Even when working at their desks, or around the room as they would before, students were now taking more responsibility for their writing.

Another support to our claim is in how students arrange themselves around the room. Before we began our project, most students would write at their own desk, and only move to a table or other location when directed by an adult. When we begin writing now, many students have their own section of the classroom where they prefer to write. They will immediately remove themselves from a spot where they feel they may be distracted and not work to their potential.

A third supporter to our claim is within the students' interaction with one another. Whereas students used to seek out the adults for advice, they are now turning to their classmates. When working in the small groups, students will turn to those seated around them and ask each other to help them work through writer's block, or come up with a good adjective to describe the setting or a character. When a student poses a question to

a nearby adult, the students within the area immediately perk up and volunteer their suggestions before the teacher has a second to think about the question.

These all clearly demonstrate the student's independence because in all three examples, the students are relying less upon the teacher for guidance. Students are keeping themselves on task, and moving themselves around the room as they see necessary. There are fewer reminders during periods for students to get to work, and very few situations where students may be asked to move their seats. Furthermore, the adults in the room are not constantly tackled with questions and concerns about the day's assignment. Students trust their classmates to help through any troubles and offer advice. They are also more willing to make suggestions to each other, showing independence and confidence in their own thinking.

Claim C: *Students are taking more risks and trying new techniques.*

As each student's confidence builds within writing, they are more compelled to take risks. Sharing time has become much more effective in that more students are volunteering to read their unfinished work, and more students are eager to offer comments and suggestions. Students look forward to both reading their own work, and listening to their classmate's writing.

The increase in risk taking is also evident within the 4 students' writing samples. Student B had been a consistent writer throughout the year. He would rush through the assignment, and rarely made changes. However, when working on his legend, he was eager to share his lead with his classmates. Upon reading his lead to a small group of students, he admitted to not having much detail, and that he could add more description

of his main character. Before these were statements this student would never make.

When previously asked to add more to his stories, he would often shut down and state “I can’t! That’s all I can write!” However, on this particular day, this was not the case. He willingly returned to his seat and rewrote his lead, adding much more description to his main character. The following day he returned in front of the entire class and shared his new beginning proudly. Student B took it upon himself to go back and try adding more detail. He successfully described his character more completely, and was proud of the end result.

Student C has shown her growth in a different area of risk taking. She has been a strong writer since the beginning of the year, and has consistently made a point of attempting techniques taught during writing lessons. However, she has not been a student who often shares her work, nor does she often offer suggestions to others. While working within these small conferencing groups, we have seen her open up more and not only share her own writing, but give advice to her fellow classmates.

From working within the small groups, students are feeling more confident to step outside their comfort levels. They share and brainstorm with their classmates and attempt new strategies and techniques. Students read their unfinished work and feel comfortable hearing their classmates’ questions and suggestions. All of these traits require risk-taking, a skill that is both difficult to teach and to practice. However, within our project, students’ risk-taking skills have both grown and flourished. They push and challenge themselves and each other to reach new levels, a job that formerly belonged only to us.

Kate’s Conclusions and Future Directions

As a result of this inquiry project I feel as though I have a great foundation of knowledge about writing from which to continue to grow from. Whereas before I had no idea where to begin with writing in my classroom, I now feel confident in teaching the subject. I definitely want to continue these writing groups within my own classroom. I love to watch the students interact with each other, and I think they gain more from a small group setting than they would if only working in partners. When working in a group, they are able to join the discussion, or may choose to continue to work on their own story. I am also there to monitor the conversation and help redirect it if necessary. I can also observe every student working in the conference and make important observations such as how they contribute to the discussion, help their classmates, if they ask for help, what areas they seem to struggle the most with, as well as how they take feedback from their classmates.

If students are only ever working in pairs to peer edit, I do not feel I could make these same observations as effectively as I could in this setting. I definitely could not make my way around to twelve pairs of students. Just the thought is enough to stress me out! By working with six or seven students at a time, they are able to conference with each other as needed. I can further divide that group into pairs if there are many students who wish to conference.

However, when working in my own classroom I will most likely be on my own, and as a result the writing period could not be set up exactly as it was in my room this past year. Depending on the number of students in my room, I may have to split them in to only three groups in order to give myself enough time to meet with them as frequently as possible. I would also most likely not be able to meet with each group every day.

They would have to rotate through the days they would be conferencing and the days they would be silent writing. Hopefully I could work out a schedule that would have me meeting with every group at least three times a week.

I believe this writing schedule would flow much nicer next year as well, since I would be able to introduce it early in the school year. It was harder to transition the students this year since they were already adapted to a writing schedule that looked much different from this one. I would begin the year by building students' conferencing skills as a whole class before breaking them up into the smaller groups. This would also give me ample time to determine their writing skills. Ideally, I would also like to generate a schedule where the same students would not always be working together. I would like to work out peer conferencing days where students would be paired with other students outside of their writing group. This would give them a chance to hear new stories and ideas aside from those they were used to.

This leads me into my new wonderings as a writing teacher. I wonder if conferencing in a group setting is truly more effective for students than simply conferencing in pairs. Do they really walk away from the group with more knowledge and a bigger variety of writing strategies than they could if working in pairs, or even as a whole class? I would think that as a result of working in a small group, they are naturally exposed to a wider range of ideas and strategies than they would be if simply working with one other person. However, it is something that I feel I should research in order to be sure.

I also wonder if students would benefit more if the writing groups were set up based upon ability instead of a mix based upon needs for that day. By placing the

students according to their needs, Michele and I were hoping to be able to keep students working at a similar pace. Of course I cannot help but wonder if the students were already working in a group small enough perhaps I could still work with students within that group at different stages in order to catch them up, or keep those working ahead occupied.

My final wondering as a result of this inquiry project is if I could set up a variety of writing conferencing centers of which students could work at independently. Maybe there could be a writing center where students who felt they needed to conference with classmates to get ideas could sit at. Another station could be for those students who were ready to edit papers with peers. Lastly, a third station could be set up for students who were finished with a piece of writing and simply wished to share it with others. Students who wished to work independently could sit at various seats around the room to continue their own work, and then wander to the specific stations as they saw necessary. Those students who finished early could either free write, or maybe seat themselves at a conferencing station to help their peers. I wonder if a plan such as this would prove effective in a classroom setting.

By focusing my inquiry project on the writing period, I have developed a new passion for the subject. Whereas before I felt no emotion towards writing, except that it was a subject that needed to be addressed daily, I now look forward to finding my own way to structure the period in order to maximize the growth of my students' writing abilities. My mind is now pouring with new ideas and new ways to approach the same concept applied to our inquiry project. I truly believe the writing groups proved themselves to be effective for both teachers and students alike. However, I cannot stop

myself from trying to find ways of improving it still. I never thought I would be motivated to focus so much time and energy on writing. I am so glad that I chose to center my inquiry project around improving the writing period. I have grown tremendously as an educator as a result of the project, and in a direction I never thought possible.

Michele's Conclusions and Future Directions

The truth is, I think many of us struggle with teaching writing because we know very little about writing. We can look to resource books that have been developed by teachers and those in the education profession that have made observations over countless hours and implemented many techniques to awaiting children. We can attend classes, workshops, and after school sessions intended to help us develop a plan of action for the writing process “attack.” But so often we find that the changes we are trying to make and lessons and formats we are implementing are done so without really knowing the rhyme or reason behind it.

One conclusion that I've been able to make is that the best thing I can do to help my student writers be successful is to write for myself and look at the process. I am writing a letter – How will I set it up? What do I need to include? Who am I addressing and how formal should it be? I am writing a poem – What emotion do I want to invoke? Should I write sentences or phrases? Is white space important? How can I include a rhythm or music in my piece? I am writing a list, a short story, a get well card ... the list goes on and on. Thinking about the steps that I have to go through and observing my own habits and practices has helped me to understand what my kids need to do and why it's important. Punctuation, capitalization, grammar, voice, audience – these all play a

crucial role. I know that, but do my students? How did I learn that and how can I show my students the vital role they play? A teacher of writing must be a doer of writing. I think the students in our room have proven that with their reactions to what Kate and I have modeled for them. They have begun to look at writing in a different way because they are beginning to see how it is used in our lives. Recently, I have been able to incorporate more of the “behind the scenes” writing that I so often would shelter from the students and showing them the steps I took or need to take in each step of the writing process.

Through this inquiry process, I feel like I have gotten a better “grip” on how to approach writing with students and the needs that need to be filled. I am feeling more confident in my ability to teach writing and I feel more confident in the skills our class has acquired. I think as a result of the changes we’ve made in our writing time and the structure of our day, the students have become much more independent writers. They are the ones that benefited most from our project. They are making better choices for themselves as far as finding a spot to work away from distractions. They are using the mini-lesson ideas and directly incorporating them into their legends. They are eager to share the changes they’ve made as a result of the feedback given to them in a constructive way from the class.

In the future, I plan to incorporate more time during the writing period for group work and whole class sharing. I want to continue to take more risks with my students, allowing them to work more in pairs and share their ideas. I am eager to begin the next school year with a hefty toolbox of strategies to choose from.

From this inquiry project, I have gathered new wonderings. How can I maintain accurate records on a child's strengths and weaknesses in writing in a manageable way? How would this writing time schedule look without an intern in my classroom? How can I continue to keep the class on task while meeting with one child for a writing conference? Would this type of a writing schedule work with beginning of the year third graders, who are not yet as independent? What might writing look like in fourth grade? How....

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