



## Building Writer's Workshop: One Principal's Journey

Suzanne C. Roy

In this article the author shares strategies for building writer's workshop on an elementary school campus. She recaps her personal journey from the initial scary moment of asking fourth graders for feedback on a memoir to the exhilaration she now experiences facilitating mini-lessons and writing conferences. The author also includes feedback from students and teachers and highlights a partnership with the San Marcos Writing Project.

I walked through the door and made my way down the familiar hallway. My heart was pounding loud and fast—just like it did

- ✓ the first time I gingerly backed into the starting blocks against two-time Olympian Mamie Rollins;
- ✓ the last at bat with the Fox Valley Lassies when the bases were loaded and we were one out and one run away from the Amateur Softball Association Nationals in Chattanooga;
- ✓ the first time Scott showed up at the

pool with his California tan, sun bleached hair, and surfer shorts—wow! He looked like Luke from *Flipper*...

Okay, okay enough of that!

I arrived at the door for my appointment. I was on the spot—one of those no-turning-around moments—and I had voluntarily put myself there. I took one deep breath, mumbled “what were you thinking?,” took a quick glance at my writer's notebook and confidently grabbed the doorknob. Waiting for my arrival in a sharing circle was the writers' community of Room 8.

For the past few weeks I had wondered what their reaction would be to the memoir I was working on. Within minutes my question would be answered. I intently listened to the other writers and observed the way they interacted with each other and the caring and confident way they provided

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specific writing feedback to each other. As a receptive audience they were obviously aware of the power that sharing writing has on developing writers and crafting words.

My thoughts were momentarily interrupted, "Dr. Roy would you like to share your piece? What specific help would you like from us?" Ms. Goodman inquired.

"Yes I would," I responded, hoping the students couldn't hear my heart beating too loudly. "I'm curious to know if your class thinks parts are too repetitive, if I've built enough tension for the reader by alternating my thoughts and actions, and I could use some ideas for the ending. The working title for my piece is *Lessons Learned*."

I started reading—a little shaky at first. It seemed funny, because I'd written lots for others to read: my doctoral dissertation, papers in graduate school, weekly newsletter columns, press releases, speeches. Once, I was even a part-time sports writer.

But this was different, this was about my thoughts—my memoir—about asking fourth grade students to critique my work.

When I finished I received a good suggestion or two for the ending, a difference of opinion on the repetitive part, and numerous "I liked." I left the room that day knowing that the students had a sophisticated understanding of the writing process and, perhaps more important, they perceived themselves as writers. A perception that is still evident today.

I shared my revised piece during the publishing celebration that was proudly attended by family and friends. Two of the students had even illustrated the cover for me so that I could have the same experience as my newly adopted classmates. It was great fun to get positive feedback on the revisions I had made and the ending that I had selected.

I have returned to the Room 8 writers' community on other occasions. Sometimes I sit in on mini-lessons as a writer myself. Sometimes I confer with students on their

writing and nudge them along. And sometimes I get some feedback on one of my own pieces.

Recently, I asked for some assistance on the revision of a piece I had originally completed two years ago for the local Audubon newsletter titled "Some Days My Most Interesting 'Birdies' Aren't Recorded on My Scorecard," an essay about the birds I observed while golfing. I explained that I wanted to transform it into an article to persuade folks that golfing and birding (or is it birding and golfing?) are not mutually exclusive.

I knew that I had arrived as an equal member of the writers' community when my classmates suggested, "Not to say your piece is boring, but you might want to consider pruning it a little and get to the point!" And you know, they were right! I'm still reworking that feature article.

### **Building My Own Understanding**

My experiences with the Room 8 writers' community, the explicit mini-lessons presented by the teacher, the nudging that occurred in expertly facilitated conferences, and the powerful writing I observed motivated me to expand my knowledge. I started reading all of the books written by Lucy Calkins, Ralph Fletcher, Donald Graves, Shelley Harwayne and Katie Wood Ray and engaging in thoughtful conversations with teachers committed to writer's workshop.

This past summer I attended the 21st Annual Summer Institute on the Teaching of Writing sponsored by the Writing Project at Teachers College Columbia University. Daily lectures by Lucy Calkins, keynotes by Carl Anderson, Isoke Nia, Stephanie Parsons, Katherine Bomer and Donald Graves, and an administrator strand facilitated by Kathleen Tolan have inspired me to take a more active leadership role in growing writers' workshop at our school.

### Going Public with My Writing

With the encouragement and support of teachers, I have facilitated numerous mini-lessons and writing conferences in kindergarten through fifth grade classes. I have learned a great deal about the writing process and the development of writers. During a conference with a student in a kindergarten/first grade multi-age class after a mini-lesson on making connections to a book, I had the great joy of helping Alexandre discover that he "could turn the page" when he got to the end of a completed one. For a brief moment in time, he was convinced that we were partners in a covert operation! His teacher wisely supported his discovery the next day with a mini-lesson on what to do when you get to the end of a page. Alexandre proudly suggested to his classmates that they too could "turn the page!" Alexandre is no longer a reluctant writer.

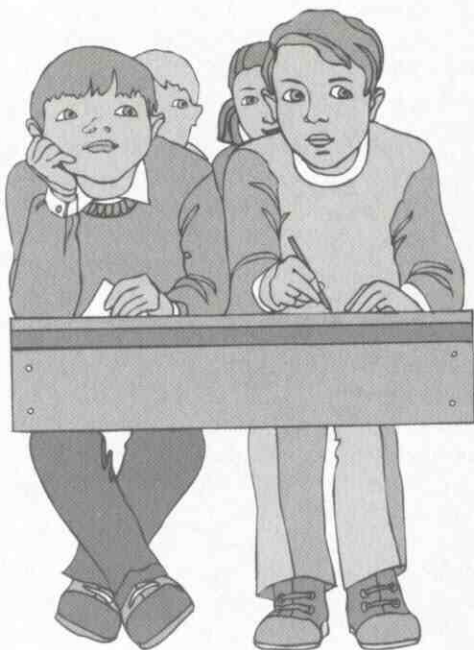
And I am no longer a reluctant public writer, as I have discovered the power of principals leading a more public writing life. Since I've been facilitating mini-lessons and sharing my writing with students and teachers, I have experienced even deeper connections with many of them. It's exciting to see them walking around campus with their little sticky-notes-filled writer's notebooks making observations or sharing pieces with me. Now when I'm in front of the school, children will engage me in conversation about their latest work and inquire about mine. They have even suggested that I submit pieces for publication.

### Feedback from Students and Teachers

Students have been overwhelmingly supportive of having me in their classrooms helping to develop their writing. Corey, a fifth grade student, credited me with inspiring him to keep a writer's notebook, helping him enjoy writing, and living the "writerly" life. Anthony, a new student to our school, noted that, "I really like writer's

workshop, it's my favorite time of school, except recess." He suggests that I am "very good at writing" and he enjoys my visits to his class, "I like it when she comes in because I think I have gotten better at writing this year." Tyler commented that my mini-lessons and conferencing helped her get to know me better. One student, writing to other principals, recommended, "I think that you should do mini-lessons because it helps the students and I'm sure you want to do everything you can to help them." She concluded that with my help, "It is way easier for me to write now."

Teachers also have provided enthusiastic feedback about my taking a more active role in writer's workshop. They have observed their students demonstrating an increased passion for writing, and "since the principal is placing more importance on writing, the students are placing more importance too." One teacher noted, "It's powerful for students to see important adults in their lives modeling a 'writerly' lifestyle."





### Building a Shared Understanding

My willingness to take risks and develop my skills has enhanced our professional learning community. We have engaged in thoughtful conversations about the needs of specific students, instructional strategies, and curriculum mapping and planning. Our writing workshop study group reads and discusses mentor texts such as *The Writing Workshop: Working Through the Hard Parts (And They're All Hard Parts)*.<sup>1</sup> We support each other in keeping writer's notebooks so that we can develop as writers ourselves, share touchstone texts and demonstrate mini-lessons. This approach to professional development helps meet the needs of diverse adult learners. It has had a positive impact on student learning and the development of writers and has enriched our caring community.

### A Valuable Partnership

A partnership with the San Marcos Writing Project also has accelerated the growth of the writer's workshop at our school and district. Four of the teachers attended a five-week summer invitational writing project at California State University San Marcos to develop themselves as writers and enhance their skills in teaching writing. They immediately were able to apply their learning at the San Marcos Writing Project Young Writers Camp.

Our campus was buzzing with 54 second through eighth grade students who attended for two weeks. Our goals were to introduce students to the fun aspect of writing, to help them recognize that they have important things to communicate, to support their skill building with explicit mini-lessons and conferencing, and to experience writing. This setting provided energized collegial conversations and many opportunities to enhance our mini-lesson and conferencing skills.

My experiences with the Young Writers

Camp gave me the confidence to continue to build my understanding and practice of writer's workshop throughout the school year.

### Coming Full Circle

When I think back on my initial entry into the writers' community in Room 8 last year, I marvel at how far we have all come. Now, on almost a daily basis, I walk through the door and down the familiar hallway. Now my heart beats loud and fast

- ✓ with anticipation of the excitement to come;
- ✓ as writing unfolds;
- ✓ as writers discover their voice.

I arrive at the door for my appointment. I am on the spot—one of those no-turning-around moments—and I have voluntarily put myself here. I take one deep breath, a quick glance at my writer's notebook and confidently grab the doorknob. Anxiously waiting for my arrival is another writers' community. And I can't think of any place I'd rather be! Δ

### Reference

1. Ray, K. and L.L. Laminack. *The Writing Workshop: Working Through the Hard Parts (And They're All Hard Parts)*. Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 2001.

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