

# A Principal's Guide to Leadership in the Teaching of Writing



**PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN  
THE TEACHING OF WRITING**

**HELPING TEACHERS WITH UNITS OF STUDY**

LUCY CALKINS ♦ LAURIE PESSAH





*firsthand*

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# MARCH

## PRIORITIZING WRITING INSTRUCTION

When the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) held its annual international conference in New York City in 2007, my colleagues and I brought several hundred participants to visit a score of New York City schools. Those visitors, like the thousands before them who have come to see reading and writing workshops done to scale, came away saying, “I had no idea there could be whole schools in which teachers teach reading and writing as workshops and do it so well.”

What the visitors may not have realized is that it is far easier to lift the level of reading and writing instruction when professional development is shared among all the members of a school community. Michael Fullan, author of dozens of books on school reform, has said that if professional study is going to make a difference in our schools, it can’t just make the individual smarter; it needs to make the school smarter. He feels that in most schools, capacity is far too scattered. That is, Bill knows A, Tom knows B, but what each of them knows is not aggregated. If your school is going to make dramatic progress in supporting literacy development, the day needs to come—maybe not this year, but sometime soon—when you say to teachers, “We are all in this together. We’re going to help each other learn about teaching reading and writing. None of us will do this alone, in isolation.”

What a difference it makes when teachers’ knowledge of good practice is shared! As Tom Sergiovanni says, “Intelligence needs to be socialized” (2004). The NCTE visitors at one school watched a teacher, Zoe, convene her twenty-eight third graders in the meeting area by saying simply, “Writers,” and then scanning the room, waiting for each child to pause in what he or she was doing and to look at her. “Let’s gather. Watch me,” Zoe said, and

### THIS MONTH

- **Decide if writing instruction will be your priority.**
- **Bring stakeholders into the decision.**
- **Choose a particular approach.**
- **Throw yourself into your chosen approach.**

then she gestured for one table of children after another to stand, push in chairs, and walk to the meeting area where they sat in assigned rug spots, opened their writer’s notebooks, and started rereading the previous day’s

For too many of you, the role of principal has meant, by definition, that you work alone, as no one else within your school has a job that is even remotely like your own. But it does not need to be this way.

writing. Claiming her seat at the front of the meeting area, Zoe began, “Writers, today I am going to teach you *another* way the essayists angle their anecdotes to support their ideas.” Zoe gestured to a chart that listed strategies she’d already taught for accomplishing this goal. “Before I teach you another strategy for angling your anecdotes, would you and your partner look at the writing you did yesterday, and for just a minute, consider which of these strategies you’ve already used.” Before long, Zoe had taught yet one more strategy, demonstrating it with her own writing and then supporting her

youngsters as they practiced the new strategy. As she sent her writers off to work on their essays, one of the visitors whispered in awe, “How long has she been teaching?”

“Three months,” I answered.

Shaking her head in disbelief, the visitor marveled, “How did she get to be so good?”

The answer, of course, lies in Zoe’s community of practice. Although she is a new teacher, Zoe’s methods of teaching are not new. They have, instead, gone through hundreds of drafts and benefited from the brilliance of scores of teachers. And Zoe is not alone. If you establish a schoolwide approach to teaching writing, all your teachers—not just your first-year teachers like Zoe—will benefit from standing on each other’s shoulders. As Tom Sergiovanni reminds us, “The greatest asset a school has is its collective IQ” (2004).

Today it is not only *teachers* but also *school leaders* who benefit tremendously from being part of a community of practice, where methods of leadership, like methods of teaching, are articulated, revised, developed, shared, and then rearticulated, further revised, refined, and shared again.

For too many of you, the role of principal has meant, by definition, that you work alone, as no one else within your school has a job that is even remotely like your own. But it does not need to be this way. Among the schools that the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project knows best, principals are continually visiting each other’s schools, working alongside each other in study groups, sharing tools for analyzing the teaching that occurs across a

grade level or throughout a discipline, coauthoring vision statements, developing and refining tactics for rallying their communities, sharing strategies, and improving teaching and learning. This book can bring you into this community of practice.

## DECIDE IF WRITING INSTRUCTION WILL BE YOUR PRIORITY

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Reform in writing will only go well in your school if you decide that this is a priority. Few things matter more than a leader having a vision and being able to rally people around that vision. Nearly every time I speak to principals, I quote from *In Search of Excellence*. The authors, Peters and Waterman, studied promising American companies in order to discover what makes their organizations work, and they came from that research with a clear message. They say, “Let us suppose we were asked for one all-purpose bit of advice, one truth that we were able to distill from all the excellent company research. We might be tempted to say, ‘Figure out your value system. Decide what your company stands for.’ Clarifying the value system and breathing life into it are the greatest contributions a leader can make.” They add, “The real difference between success and failure of an institution can be traced to the question of how well the organization brings out the great energies and talents of its people. What does it do to help people find common cause with each other?” (1982, 279, 291).

The call to figure out one’s value system is a call to figure out one’s priorities. And in the world in which we live, a world in which neither time nor money is unlimited, this means figuring out how you will invest your time, your teachers’ time, and your children’s time. It also means figuring out how you will invest your school’s discretionary budget, meager as that may be. *If* you decide that improving writing instruction across your school is a priority, then you are deciding that there will be *time* for teachers to learn about teaching writing—not endless time, not time that isn’t hard-won, but nevertheless, time that teachers will use to study together. And similarly, if improving writing is a priority, then you’ll help teachers ensure that children have time to write. If writing is a schoolwide priority, then you are also deciding that there will be discretionary finances to support at least the most essential materials and professional development.

Readers, the temptation will be great to decide, “My priority will be writing, math, reading, science, vocabulary, and school environment.” Of course, it is normal for a school leader to spotlight more than one curriculum area,

but everything cannot be a priority. If you say that your priority is to improve instruction in half a dozen subjects, then none of your reforms will have space enough to root and grow.

You will also be tempted to say, “*This year my priority will be improving writing instruction, and next year we’ll focus on improving another subject area.*” Resist that temptation as well! You know that no reform that is worth anything will be accomplished within a year, and if you aren’t sure of this, you need only glance over research on school change to be assured. If improving writing instruction is a priority, it needs to be a priority for at least two years. After that, wonderful writing instruction will hopefully become part and parcel of what your school is all about. Before you rally teachers from throughout your school to teach in a particular way, make sure you do not consider this direction to be in the tentative, pilot-program stage. It is fine to pilot an approach, but do your piloting with just a cluster of respected teachers as part of a prolonged, fact-finding mission. I wouldn’t try to rally the whole school to participate in a pilot.

I recognize that writing instruction is not the only wise priority you could decide to pursue. But if you want to make a palpable, dramatic difference in the quality of teaching and learning across a whole school and to do so in ways that will be met with universal acclaim by parents and teachers, there are frankly few other avenues you could take that would be more promising. You’ll want to be clear enough about the reasons why you’ve chosen to prioritize writing instruction that you can share your rationale with your teachers, your curriculum leaders, and anyone else whose energy and commitment you want to enlist.

### **Reasons to Prioritize Writing Instruction**

- ◆ Writing is widely regarded as one of the basics, yet it is often given short shrift. Writing has been chronically undertaught, and it is hard to find anyone who doesn’t believe that attention to writing is long overdue. When a child enters an elementary school, math and reading instruction are part of that child’s bill of rights. No child will be in a class in which the teacher says, “I don’t really teach math, it is not my thing,” or “The kids just do math while I lead reading groups,” or “We mostly do math around special occasions—Mother’s Day math, Valentine’s Day math.” Yet, although writing is essential to success in most subjects, and although children are held accountable for their success in writing, writing often does not receive attention that corresponds to the attention given to reading and math.

- ◆ The field of teaching writing is not marked by huge debates. Those who champion skills in reading and those who champion meaning agree that children need to work through the writing process, that they profit from direct and explicit instruction and from opportunities to choose their own topics and to write about subjects they care about when possible. The different camps also agree that teachers need to assess what kids can do and can almost do, and to teach children to lift the level of their work bit by bit.
- ◆ Most teachers are eager to receive help in teaching writing, allowing professional development to proceed more smoothly. Professional development in writing can usually proceed without challenging any teacher's existing corpus of knowledge and usually does not call into question any existing program. If writing instruction in a school is problematic, usually the issue is not a problematic approach to teaching writing, but instead that writing is either not being taught at all or it is not taught in any planned, consistent way. Every teacher is expected to be an expert on teaching *reading*, so it's not always easy for teachers to assume the role of novice or learner in that area. But it is generally acceptable to be a novice when it comes to learning to teach writing well.
- ◆ When teachers engage in professional study around the teaching of writing, it is easy to coach into and supervise this work because writing is concrete and visible. Principals and literacy coaches can support and supervise staff development in writing more easily than they can support and supervise staff development in other curricular areas because improvements in student writing are visible. Reading, for example, is not as visible.
- ◆ When teachers learn methods for teaching writing, they are learning methods for teaching *anything*. The field of teaching of writing has developed some high-level and very successful methods—including methods for teaching minilessons, strategy lessons, and conferring—and these methods have tremendous potential when brought into other curricular areas.
- ◆ When students' writing improves, there are pay-offs in every area of curriculum (to do well in reading, social studies, or even science depends on the ability to write well) and on most assessments. Powerful

instruction in writing is one of the best ways to help students read better. Because writing and reading are reciprocal processes, the carryover between writing development and reading development is especially strong. Improving writing skills also has carryover to other curricular areas.

- ◆ Teaching of writing is relevant to all learners. The writing workshop is appropriate for kids with special needs, for English language learners, for kindergartners, for adolescents, for adults. When people write, they always work at their own level. This makes the teaching of writing a powerful area for shared and yet differentiated study, one that can bring a whole school and, indeed, a whole community together.
- ◆ When students receive clear, systematic writing instruction, the level of their writing increases in dramatic, immediately obvious ways. After a few weeks of improved writing instruction, children will already have produced more and better writing than previously. That means you and your teachers have stories and notes and letters, and then, more powerful stories and essays and letters to admire with the whole community. This creates tremendous buy-in.
- ◆ When people write together, relationships strengthen. We become visible to each other. We bring our lives and our voices to the table. Everything changes as a result—within a classroom, and within a school.

The decision to make staff development in writing a priority for your school is just the first of many decisions you will need to make. For now, refrain from announcing your decision to your whole staff. You have a lot of work to do before you'll want to roll out an official announcement.

Once you have chosen to improve writing instruction across your school, then it is important for you and your literacy coach, your assistant principal, and probably a core group of teacher-leaders from your school to talk through the contours of your school's approach to teaching writing. If you have purchased this book as a part of *Professional Development in the Teaching of Writing*, you may have decided already to endorse the approach represented in that series and in the *Units of Study* books. Nevertheless, it will be important to make your decision transparent and to invite other stakeholders to join you in mulling over the contours of the particular approach to teaching writing that your school adapts.

## BRING STAKEHOLDERS INTO THE DECISION

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There is no one right way for a school leader to go about deciding on a school's approach to teaching writing. It is probably important, though, that you consider alternatives and invite others in on your thinking. If that decision has been made already, you will still need to discuss it with others, helping everyone become grounded in the decision and learning people's areas of concern, excitement, and hope. As part of this, you'll want to be ready to address concerns people may voice.

### **Advocate for Your Beliefs**

A school principal is called upon to lead. Inviting others into conversations about approaches to teaching writing doesn't mean you need to withhold your own views. You are absolutely entitled to be an impassioned advocate for big beliefs that matter very much to you. It is especially important for you to wear your beliefs on your sleeve if those beliefs center on children. "It's a huge priority for me that our kids grow up knowing they are writers," you might say. "For me, it is crucial that our kids not only *write* but *love to write*." You can be public and passionate about your beliefs without shutting down debate or silencing contrary voices.

As I mentioned earlier, although you can certainly share your predispositions about approaches to teaching writing, it is also important for you to think carefully about the ideas of others. All stakeholders will need to know they have a voice in the direction of your school; you must at least show your key people that you have considered what they have to offer on this topic. You probably will not want to convene a community meeting in order to decide on an approach towards teaching writing, as that could create a momentum that ends up taking your school in a direction you didn't expect (or want), but you will certainly want to meet one-on-one with individuals, saying to one person or another, "I've been looking at our kids' writing and thinking that, as a school, we should invest ourselves more in teaching writing. What approaches to teaching writing do you think would fit well into our school?" Or "In what ways do you think this approach to teaching writing will fit well with our school? In what ways do you think we'll be challenged?"

If a person on your staff is a strong advocate for an approach you don't want to accept or have not accepted, you can usually find a way to support that person's central message if you ask that person to help you understand his deeper rationale. "What draws you to that approach?" you can ask. "What's

the key thing in it that sways you?” Almost always, the goals a person wants to advance will be goals that you, too, can support, albeit in a different way. In such a case, you might decide to tailor your approach so as to highlight a few principles that a particular stakeholder especially supports.

The bigger point here is that the leader of any organization needs to create buy-in, and it will be easier for you to rally your community around a new emphasis on the teaching of writing if key people—influential people—in the organization feel as if their voices have been heard, their priorities have been protected. Your people will be more ready to invest in a direction if they feel their opinions have been heard.

## **Respond to People’s Concerns**

You’ll want to talk and think with others about the approach your school will adopt. It may help you to be able to anticipate doubts others may have about the approach described in this book and to be able to address those concerns.

### **“A process approach isn’t aligned with the writing tests.”**

The most widespread reason for not electing a process approach to teaching writing comes from people who worry that this approach generally does not exactly match the requirements on high-stakes tests where students do not usually have opportunities to choose topics or to work across a sequence of days. People who reject this approach, then, generally decide instead that they want every day’s writing to resemble the writing that kids will be asked to do on standardized tests.

Let me speak to this concern. First, although there are defensible choices a school leader could make regarding writing that differ from the decisions I would personally make, I do not believe the decision to emphasize one-shot, first draft writing (such as one finds on tests) instead of the writing process has merit. There is national data supporting teaching writing as a process. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is often referred to as “the nation’s report card” because it is the only assessment given across states for decades. The 2002 NAEP data show a positive correlation at all three assessed grades (grades 4, 8, and 12) between writing scores and writing folder or portfolio use. That is, students who write often and who are given opportunities to draft and revise their writing and to collect their writing in portfolios—in short, students working in a process approach—do better on that high-stakes test than those students who do not learn within such a context.

There is no evidence to support the notion that if a school's curriculum is predominately test practice, children will do better on standardized tests. In New York City, for example, the schools that do best on standardized tests are not those that substitute test prep for a writing curriculum, but are, instead, the schools that teach a process approach. The neighboring towns that boast especially high achievements on standardized tests are also strongholds for a process approach to teaching writing. I suspect this is true in your area as well—look at the high-achieving districts and you will see that very few of them boast a curriculum that revolves around a steady diet of test prep.

You and those with whom you work may still worry over the notion that a process approach to teaching writing allows children to work for weeks on a piece of writing, a luxury they cannot have when faced with a standardized test. It may be comforting to learn that whereas some advocates of a process approach never ask students to produce on-demand, one-shot writing, my colleagues and I actually track kids' abilities over time to produce effective on-demand writing. We believe that if a writer learns to form paragraphs as part of editing, the next time that writer approaches a draft, it is important to remind the writer to use what she learned (in this case, paragraphing) at the end of the preceding cycle of work at the start of the new cycle while drafting. That is, in the process approach towards writing, represented in the *Units of Study* series, teachers explicitly teach students that what they do during revision and editing must soon move forward in their writing process, becoming part of their rehearsal and drafting. This means that over time, a writer's first draft writing becomes much more conventional, more organized, and more well written. That said, it still remains true that in a process approach to teaching writing, students are not expected to fuss and persevere over refining the details of a text until they reach the final stage of working on that piece of writing.

In the process approach towards writing . . . teachers explicitly teach students that what they do during revision and editing must soon move forward in their writing process, becoming part of their rehearsal and drafting.

**“I’m not sure these teachers can manage a process approach.”**

Some school leaders also reject a process approach because they claim the approach relies on particularly knowledgeable teachers. Some principals question whether their teachers “are smart enough” to orchestrate a writing workshop.

I agree that a process approach to teaching writing relies on teachers' intelligence and skills. Instead of regarding this as a drawback of the approach, however, I regard this as one of the most important reasons to adopt a process approach. The decision to adopt this approach leads a school to recruit, retain, develop and make use of teachers' intelligence and skills. If you, as the principal, worry that your teachers are not up to the task of learning to teach writing well, I urge you to visit any one of scores and scores of schools across New York City and the nation that have adopted this approach schoolwide. Visit a school that resembles your own. I suspect you will see that our strengths are not in our DNA alone—our strengths are the result of the communities of practice that form around us and help us to grow and improve our work.

**“I don't think a process approach is rigorous enough to be effective.”**

Finally, some people who question a process approach to teaching writing do so out of the belief that a process approach to writing is somehow less rigorous than an approach that asks every writer to always produce neat, correct, conventional, one-shot texts.

A process approach allows people to work as authors do, focusing on only some aspects of writing at a time, relegating other aspects to a later point in the process. Deciding to adopt a process approach means that kids in your school will usually go through a cycle of work on each piece of writing,

A process approach allows people to work as authors do, focusing on only some aspects of writing at a time.

starting with choosing a topic and planning for the writing, then progressing to writing a rough draft followed by making consequential meaning-based revisions, and ending with, finally, editing for publication. When a school adopts a process approach to writing, this means that students' work generally spans a sequence of days, and it means that along the progression of that time, the writing that kids do will not always be as perfect as possible.

For example, a writer might say, “I'm just going to scrawl my memories of that day,” and then free-write quickly, filling several pages in short order, with those several pages probably not demonstrating the writer's best penmanship or spelling. A commitment to a process approach, then, requires that a school embrace longer-term projects and accept the idea that writers relegate some concerns until later in the process of work on a piece.

To those who suppose that this approach is not rigorous, show them the work done by children in process classrooms. If you do not have schools

nearby to visit, show them the videos of children on the DVDs *Seeing Possibilities* or *Big Lessons from Small Writers*. Show them the writing samples produced by the children that are found at the end of each unit of study and on the CDs that accompany each set of units in the *Units of Study* series. The children's writing will speak for itself.

## CHOOSE A PARTICULAR APPROACH

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As I've said, you and other stakeholders in the school will probably want to mull over various approaches to improving writing instruction in order to come together around a particular approach. Your first decision will be whether to emphasize teaching writing as a process. We've anticipated objections some might have, but the truth is that there is fairly widespread acceptance of the notion that young people need to be taught how they can use the writing process to produce effective products. Even Warriner's grammar—the traditional old school textbook I recall from my childhood—assumes a process approach to teaching writing. This means, then, that in your school kids will usually progress through a cycle of work on each piece, starting with planning and rehearsing, then progressing to writing a rough draft followed by making meaning-based revisions and leading, finally, to editing. A commitment to a process approach requires that a school embraces longer-term projects.

### **Will You Give Students Topic Choice?**

If you, like most educators, have already decided that writing is best taught as a process, there are further decisions you'll need to make before you've determined your particular approach. Odd as it may sound, the next most fundamental decision may be this: Will the writers in your school be encouraged to choose their own topics most of the time, writing about matters they know and care about; or will you imagine that teachers are assigning whole-class topics?

It may surprise you that this is as fundamental a decision as I'm suggesting, but the truth is that the tone and feel of a writing classroom is utterly different when students are given "ownership" over their writing. This means that students can progress at their own pace, with some students spending more time on one piece or another. It means that students can write about subjects they know well, using writing as a way to bring their lives and voices into the classroom, turning youngsters into teachers on topics in which they have expertise.

## Respond to People’s Concerns Over Topic Choice

Topic choice is one of the pillars of a writing workshop. If you and some of your colleagues are committed to the idea of giving students topic choices most of the time, then you’ll want to anticipate and be ready to respond to people who have concerns with this notion.

### “Our students don’t know what to write about!”

Sometimes the principal (and teachers) in a school say, “We want to teach writing process, but our kids don’t know what to write about, so we give them story starters.” This is a reasonable thing for teachers and a school principal to say if they have not yet received help teaching writing, because it takes a certain amount of professional development to know how to teach kids to generate their own ideas and to write with self-reliance. If teachers cling to the idea of teacher-assigned topics (even after they’ve received help showing children how to generate their own topics), it may be that the teachers are loathe to give up responsibility for generating interesting assignments. This may have been the only job some teachers felt comfortable doing in writing classrooms. If *students* assume responsibility for deciding on topics, then what will the *teacher* do? These hesitations should fade away once teachers receive professional development. Once teachers study the teaching of writing, they will have a repertoire of strategies for helping students select their own topics, and their resistance to allowing writers to decide on their own topics will, most of the time, dissipate.

### “But I have topics I need students to write about!”

Another reason teachers may have a continued commitment to assigned topics is the teacher’s decision to emphasize writing as a tool for learning across the content areas, where most of the writing that students are asked to do centers on whole-class inquiry topics. These teachers are trying to kill two birds with one stone; they want to teach writing while also teaching students to develop and display a command of a curricular unit. I believe such a decision shortchanges the teaching of writing.

There is no question that it is important for kids to write throughout the day in every discipline. It goes without saying that students need to write as part of their work in social studies, science, and reading. The debate, then, is only whether these other disciplines are the best forum for teaching kids to write well. Informed people will come to different decisions about this.

*Units of Study*, the firsthand series for which this book creates an administrator's foundation, is fashioned around the assumption that students learn to write best when they are working with maximum engagement. The series assumes that human beings will be especially engaged in writing if they are able to write about subjects of their own choosing, and to write about subjects that they know and care tremendously about. That is, the series is built on the premise that in general, the best forum for teaching writing skills is within a course of study in which writing itself is the designated priority. It may be that for a month or two, the wall between social studies and the writing workshop comes down and students select topics under the umbrella of a curricular subject, but the series is designed on the idea that most of the time, students will choose their own topics for writing.

You need to decide whether your teachers will rally writers to work within a shared genre, towards somewhat shared understandings of qualities of good writing.

I can imagine a contrary argument, especially in instances in which social studies or science is taught with such depth and rigor and engagement that, in fact, students end up caring passionately about the subjects under study. The downside of embedding all the writing that students do into the content areas is that teachers may focus instruction on vocabulary and concepts of the content area, devoting less time to shoring up writing skills. That is, every decision has its advantages and disadvantages, and you will need to make informed decisions. In such a context, it is difficult for the teacher to explicitly teach the skills and strategies of effective writing, however, because much of the instruction would focus on the subject rather than on ways in which students are writers about that subject.

## **Will Your Teachers Rally Students Around Shared Units of Study?**

If you and your teachers decide that kids will learn to write best by working mostly on topics of their own choosing, then you are ready for the next choice.

You need to decide whether your teachers will rally writers to work within shared units of study. Can you imagine writers in a classroom all working in the same genre towards somewhat shared understandings of qualities of good writing? Can you imagine them drawing upon a somewhat shared repertoire of strategies for writing well? That is, can you imagine that for at least large stretches of the school year, all the children in a particular classroom might be working on, say, short stories? Can you imagine the

work within a classroom will be shared so that for a few days all the children in the classroom might be inventing, using, and sharing techniques for building tension within a story? Can you imagine your teachers planning a sequential curriculum, so that, for example, one grade might focus on teaching children to write *realistic* short stories and another grade—perhaps a higher grade—might focus on teaching them to write *fantasy* short stories?

Again, it is helpful for the school leader to be able to anticipate alternate views. In this instance, you should know that some leaders of writing process approaches advocate that any sort of imposed direction compromises the individual writer's right to make choices. Advocates of such a position argue that it is crucial that children choose not only their topic but also their genre, so that one child is apt to be working on a poem while the next child works on an essay. The people who espouse this position claim that it is vitally important for young writers to learn to follow meaning to form, and therefore need to be in a position to control decisions pertaining to the form and genre of their writing. So even when students are writing in a shared genre, these proponents believe writers' work should be as varied as possible. For example, if the teacher were to gather kids together to study a shared genre such as feature articles, the teacher's main goal would be to help students discover that feature articles come in all shapes, sizes, structures, and voices. Advocates of this position suggest that a good deal of instruction must revolve around encouraging students to immerse themselves in studies of a wide variety of texts so that each child can find a text or two that resembles the text the individual wants to write. These advocates argue that if every writer is working on something different than his or her classmates, this does not hamper instruction because qualities of good writing are shared across every genre—that details matter to a piece of writing whether it is a political cartoon or a short story—and, therefore, teachers can teach a quality of writing, knowing that it might at one point pertain to the work children do with their poems and at another time to editorials.

This was my position twenty years ago, and I still encourage teachers to devote a bit of the school year to units of study that allow students to follow their meanings to a form. That is, I imagine one month might be devoted to a unit on feature articles in which the teacher might help children learn that there is no dominant structure to feature articles, thus teaching writers to follow meaning to form. For another month, a teacher might rally students to study an author, and as part of this, children might select authors they admire so that the work one child engaged in would be utterly unlike the work of another child.

However, I would not advocate that teachers devote the bulk of the school year to writing workshops in which each child embarks on his or her own individual journey. My colleagues and I have found that teaching has much more traction when children are engaged in similar work. For example, if we teach a minilesson on developing tension in a story, it is much more likely that our teaching will have traction if everyone in the room is working on a story. Then too, if everyone in the class is involved in writing a story, we can teach not only a single lesson on story tension, but we can follow up that lesson with deeper and more rigorous work on this challenging aspect of writing fiction. That additional teaching can be developed in response to what kids are doing and what they need. It is less easy to imagine how such a line of teaching would happen if, in fact, only three members of the class were writing stories in the first place.

Although I agree that some qualities of good writing are similar across genres, I also feel confident that it is a different matter to write an essay than to write a poem. For all these reasons, I think it helps to gather kids around a shared study of the major structures/genres of writing.

There is one more reason why I encourage teachers to rally all their students to work for a time on a shared genre of writing. I believe this means that the writers in a classroom can develop a shared foundation. Once a community of writers has studied some kinds of writing and developed some writing skills, the members of that writing community can harness those skills towards more complex operations, which allow the work of one year or one month to build on preceding work. It is valuable for teachers to help kids progress somewhat sequentially along a continuum of increasingly more complex writing projects.

## THROW YOURSELF INTO YOUR CHOSEN APPROACH

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If you've made the commitment to prioritize the teaching of writing, to use the process approach of teaching writing, to support student choice and shared genre work, dedicate yourself fully to this path. Whatever choice you make, I recommend forgiving the little problems in order to harvest the big benefits. Another time, several years down the road, you and your colleagues will no doubt look critically at whatever it is you are doing, refining and extending your practices in ways that can address glitches and gaps.

I can promise you that if you make this decision, if your teachers use the *Units of Study* books, and if teachers make a commitment to teaching a writing workshop every day (or even just four days a week), and if they plan

together and help each other, your children's writing will astonish you. Their work will become dramatically, palpably better. In countless cities and towns, it has been the stellar quality of children's work (accompanied by the enthusiasm of parents and teachers) that has brought stakeholders aboard.

If you decide to make these commitments, Laurie and I hope that this book will offer you not only advice but also companionship, helping you as a school leader to realize that although you are the only one in your school with your particular job, there are thousands of other principals who have made the similar decision to lift the level of writing instruction across their school. And you need not reinvent the wheel. Instead, you can become part of a community of practice, learning from insights and ideas gleaned from all those others who, like you, have set out to make a world of difference.

By late March, you'll want to have made these decisions. If you decide to pursue the writing workshop as supported by the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project and more specifically by the *Units of Study* books, then buckle your seatbelt and prepare for a fast-paced and exhilarating year!



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“Making Schoolwide Change with the Teaching of Writing.” Lucy Calkins and Laurie Pessah answer critical questions about reform in the teaching of writing.