REVISITING WRITING WORKSHOP

At the end of another week of teaching, Mary stands by her desk, looking at the pile of student writing she has promised to grade over the weekend. Sighing to herself, she wonders aloud, "Why am I creating so much work for myself? Every weekend, that seems to be all I do, grade student writing. I just don't know if I can keep this up!"

During the early years of Adventist education, Ellen White, when giving counsel for teachers in the church's fledgling church schools, considered writing instruction an essential ingredient of the language curriculum:

"One of the fundamental branches of learning is language study. In all our schools special care should be taken to teach the students to use the English language correctly in speaking, reading, and writing. Too much cannot be said in regard to the importance of thoroughness in these lines."[1]

She expanded upon this advice by expressing the following wish:

"It is my wish that the children study and write some each day. . . If the children have a purpose and a will they can advance in knowledge daily. . . .If the children would practice in writing following closely the copy books and making use of the instruction they have had in writing they can by practice become good writers. But patience is required in this, as well as other things."[2]

These quotes are powerful statements supporting the inclusion of writing in every school's curriculum. Notwithstanding, in more then a few Adventist classrooms I have visited in North America, students experience minimal direct writing instruction. When I ask teachers if they have ever considered using writing workshop, most say they have been

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BY RAY OSTRANDER

introduced to it but don't feel they have enough information to implement it. So I believe it is time to revisit writing workshop. That, then, is the purpose of this article, to review some essentials of writing workshop along with supplemental information to make it easier to use.

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Considering the Writing Reality

It's probably no accident that most adults seek employment in jobs that require little if any writing.[3] Children, however, do not have that luxury. From 1st grade on, they are involved in some form of writing nearly every day. With the exception of reading and math, students are asked to do more with writing than with any other academic skill. And, as they progress through school, not only do the number and diversity of writing assignments increase, but also the sophistication of the writing skills required. Homework, class work, note taking, essay tests—all increase across the curriculum as students progress. Furthermore, with the increased emphasis on high-stakes testing, more and more students face tests that include questions requiring them to write short paragraphs and essays.[4]

There is much more to writing than coming up with a good idea. Learning to write is similar to learning to speak, read, or play a musical instrument. All involve developmental skills and sequential processes. If writing is taught appropriately, new skills build on those acquired earlier.

Writing is hard work! Compared to other academic activities, it requires more fine motor control, attention, language, and memory. During early handwriting exercises, children must combine complex physical and cognitive processes to render letters precisely and fluidly. From this early formation of letters to writing an argumentative essay, "writing involves perhaps more subskills than any other academic task. To write well requires combining multiple physical and mental processes in one concerted effort to convey information and ideas. We must, for instance, be able to move a pen, or depress a key, precisely and fluidly to render letters, remember rules of grammar and syntax, place our thoughts in an order that makes sense, and think ahead to what we want to write next."[5] As writing tasks become more difficult and complex, students must invoke a wider range of skills—not just writing legibly, logically, and in an organized way, but also being able to recall and apply rules of grammar and syntax as well as appropriate vocabulary. Combining all these and other elements of language use makes writing the most complex and difficult of the language process.[6]

The implications for elementary teachers seem obvious. Students need help to master appropriate motor skills and language development skills. For students who have not achieved mastery in previous grades, teachers must first address their instructional needs before they can help them reach their academic potential. Some students seem to take to language like ducks to water, while other students react like a cat facing a bath. However, the "skill of writing correctly will not come to them without an effort on their part. . . ."[7]

Creating a Positive Environment

What can teachers do to help students become successful writers? I believe that providing structure for the writing process through the use of a writing workshop is the answer. For those who are unfamiliar with these terms, *writing process* refers to five stages of writing: *prewriting*, *drafting*, *revising*, *editing*, and *sharing/publishing*. While these five stages seem to suggest a linear progression, Nancy Atwell reminds us the writing process is actually recursive.[8] In other words, students can be editing while they are drafting, and can share before they revise.

The writing workshop provides a framework in which the teacher can create and manage the structure in which the writing process takes place. According to Donald Graves, using writing workshop creates an optimum writing experience for students.[9]

More than a few teachers have told me that writing workshop is not easy to implement. Upon investigation, I have found three major factors that make writing workshop difficult. First, many teachers have not been trained to use it and have not experienced it themselves. While they have read about it or heard it discussed in workshops or conferences, they lack the experiential element. Second, many have not seen other teachers use writing workshop effectively, so they are missing an effective best-practices model. Another fact that intimidates some teachers is that in a writing workshop, teachers and children assume different roles. Children take more ownership and control of their writing. Teachers spend less time with whole-group instruction and more time conferencing with students, working one-on-one or in small groups.

However, like any new skill, with practice, teachers become comfortable with and look forward to writing workshop time. Nancy Atwell and Lucy Calkins note that reports from teachers and parents indicate that writing workshop has a positive effect on students' development as writers.[10] Thus, establishing a writing workshop is well worth the effort.

Creating a Positive Environment

To create a positive environment for writing, teachers must involve their students in reading. Don Murray, a writing educator, states that "text can supply us with information that we can use in any form of writing. Or it can simply spark an idea."[11] Similarly, Jane Hansen states that students who are immersed in a text-rich environment (such as stories, magazines, newspapers, biographies, and poems) gain a much better understanding of sentence structure and writing conventions, as well as a sense of syntactical

competence. Texts provide models for students to examine. By reading widely, they discover graphic and linguistic features embedded in text, such as how authors start stories and create humor, how authors report about a subject or create engaging dialogue, etc. When students can explicitly explore, analyze, and study texts, they learn how authors construct books, what strategies they use, what questions they ask, and what decisions they must make about content, characterization, and tone.[12]

Furthermore, students' reading experiences act as a springboard for writing ideas, especially among younger writers.[13] Jim Trelease points out that when students have many experiences with text, this enables them to internalize the structures and sounds of print.[14] Reading specialists such as Dressel,[15] Piazza, and Tompkins[16] state that students who hear texts read aloud frequently become better writers and are able to use longer, more complex sentences. Likewise, Ralph Fletcher and JoAnn Portalupi both note that for students experiencing literature for the first time, reading aloud to them helps "build the important foundation they need to grow as readers and writers."[17] In short, students who frequently read and listen to multiple genres of writing become better writers. Therefore, students need daily access to a wide variety of reading material.

A Place for Writing

Another important factor in writing success is the environment. Nancy Atwell posits that most professional writers have a particular place they prefer to be when they write. Here they have access to the tools they need for writing and feel at ease, mentally and physically. Student writers, too, need such a place. If at all possible, reserve certain areas of the classroom for writing. In these areas should be books, magazines, newspapers, and a bulletin board for posting writing work; computer(s) and printer, markers, stapler, thesaurus, stencils, dictionary, correction fluid, stationery, envelopes, private writing and conferencing spaces; and stack trays for student writing in various stages.[18]

Be sure to set aside a regularly scheduled time for writing. This enables students to begin to mentally review the tasks they have completed and to plan future writing tasks.

Writing should be scheduled for no fewer than three days a week. When they engage in writing less frequently, students lose the momentum necessary for successful continuation of their writing projects. Long lapses mean lengthy review to restart and the loss of ideas that usually occur as students mentally rehearse their writing.

Enabling Student Ownership and Success

For a successful writing workshop, teachers need to help students assume ownership of their own writing. This occurs, in part, by making it possible for students to retrieve, store, and organize their writing projects. These materials are kept in file or storage boxes, ideally in hanging folders. Each student should have two folders, one for work in progress and one for completed work. When students are ready

to write, they go to the storage file and retrieve their work. After the writing session is over, they place their work in the appropriate folder in reverse chronological order. In this way, current writing projects are always in front. Having students assume this responsibility not only ensures that they take ownership of their writing, it also frees the teacher to circulate, conference, and work with small groups of students on a mini-lesson follow-up in order to reinforce various writing skills as needed.

Teachers' response to student writing is another factor that affects student success. All writing has an element of vulnerability, no matter who is doing it. Student writers are especially vulnerable. Therefore, they need nurturing responses from their teachers. This does not imply that teachers should give meaningless praise, but they should try to find at least one positive element in every paper.

When students are churning out writing, correction has a chilling effect on their work. So does prolonged conversation. "I like how. . ." or "I like what . . ." is all that needs to be said. Thus, before reading the entire paper, the teacher should look for positives. Corrections can occur as students move to the revising and editing stages. When the teacher consistently uses an "accentuate the positive" approach, students will be less likely to tense up when he or she approaches their desks while they are writing, because they have learned from prior experience that the instructor is looking for the positives.[19] That is motivating.

Creating a Culture for Writing

How do teachers create a writing culture in their classrooms? First, they should compile a common set of terms related to writing and use them consistently. This means that early in the school year, when establishing writing workshop procedures, teachers need to introduce students to the jargon of writing. Terms like *brainstorm*, *sloppy copy*, *draft*, *revise*, *edit*, *author's chair*, *publish*, *conference*, *topic*, *response*, *audience*, *dialogue*, *insert*, *delete*, etc., should be introduced and used consistently. Having a common language about writing takes away some of its mystery and levels the playing field to ensure understanding. Not only will ALL students know what their teachers are talking about, but students will also have a vocabulary to use in communicating with their teachers, as well.

The teaching of writing usually follows the adage "do as I say." This poses a problem. If students never see their teachers writing or hear them share personal experiences with writing, they may conclude that writing is not that important and has no personal value to their teacher. And if their teacher does not value it, how can they be expected to do so? Therefore, teachers have to model writing tasks. This does not mean writing about exotic, spectacular, earth-shattering events. How many people's weeks are punctuated by extraordinary events? But everyone has stories about everyday life, about their passions, and about their past. Such events can be written about in journals, letters, diaries, poems, etc. The key is to let students see their teachers writing, refer occasionally to writing, and even read aloud something they have written. How can a person teach about something he or she knows nothing about? How can teachers help students solve writing problems they have not experienced and surmounted?

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Facilitating Feedback

More than a few teachers have written papers in graduate school and wondered how well they did. Weeks or months later, when the papers were returned, the value of any feedback from the instructor was lost. The lack of prompt response is one reason why students fail to put forth as much effort as they could. Delayed feedback comes too late to do much good. One of the beauties of writing workshop is that students submit papers for teacher evaluation at various times, not all on one day as with traditional writing projects. This means that teachers do not have 40 essays to grade all at one time.

Writing workshop is designed so that teachers provide immediate feedback through frequent face-to-face conferences with students. The workshop approach fosters student confidence in the teacher's comments and encourages the implementation of shared ideas. Since the face-to-face conferences occur while students are writing, teachers must learn to wait for student reaction and listen carefully before responding.

During the workshop, teachers must relate to the pupils first as writers and then as students. Therefore, the student writer becomes the focus. His or her response has a lot to do with the feedback received. Asking students *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, *why,* and *how* questions helps them talk about their writing. This in turn helps the teacher to restate what he or she is hearing. If it is not what the student intended, the teacher uses the student's words as refocusing tools, encouraging the student to "write what you told me."

Teachers must remember not to make student writing mistakes the focus of a conference. Meaning is everything. For example, meaning comes from knowing specifically what the student ate—i.e., macaroni, rather than food. If *macaroni* is misspelled, the editing cycle is the place to address that mistake. The central goal is for the students to convey meaning. If they focus on avoiding mistakes, they will be less likely to elaborate beyond the "bare facts" and more likely to write general, bland, "safe" accounts instead.

Peer Input and Group Sharing

Peer input is another forum for

feedback. One element of writing workshop I really appreciate is group sharing. This can occur in small focus groups or as a large group through the use of author's chair, a process whereby a student reads part or all of his or her work to a large group. However, teachers must make certain to create an environment that allows such sharing to occur. Students can be brutal, so part of being a writing facilitator is to ensure that put-downs such as "that's dumb" or "that's stupid" do not occur. First, the teacher must discuss why people blurt out words like *dumb* or *stupid*. Usually, these statements indicate discomfort or a lack of understanding. The teacher's role is to help students "unpack" such feelings. He or she can do this by establishing rules for response and addressing putdowns as they occur, discussing and modeling alternative ways to express feelings. Helping students learn more acceptable ways to respond often requires frequent modeling of alternative expressions. This means that teachers must keep their own biases in check when listening and responding to students.

Literacy teachers must keep several important considerations in mind: (1) They themselves need to engage in writing in some form—such as poems, journals, or narratives. (2) Writing workshop should be included in every elementary and secondary literacy educator curriculum, for when used as designed, its structure eliminates the weekend paper-grading crunch and enables more extensive student writing. (3) Frequent reading must be part of a literacy program. Reading enables writing. The more the two are linked, the greater competence students will have with language. (4) Finally, don't despair if you try implementing a writing workshop and it doesn't seem to work. Change is always fraught with uncertainty. Seek advice from books, articles, and other literacy educators who are making it work. ✐

Ray Ostrander, *who taught English Language Arts for 17 years in K-12 schools, is an Associate Professor and Director of the Master of Arts in Teaching program in the Department of Teaching, Learning, and Curriculum at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan, where he teaches, among other courses, methods for the teaching of writing in K-12 classrooms.*

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