

Workshop 2

A Shared Path

“In a writing workshop...trust is one of the most important things to establish right at the beginning, because kids are putting themselves out there and they’re not going to want to share if they don’t feel like the classroom is a safe place for them.”

—Lori Mayo, 9th Grade, Far Rockaway High School, Queens, New York

Introduction

Writing was once viewed as a solitary effort, a vision supported by images of writers alone in quiet rooms, struggling to get their thoughts into print. That view has changed. Now effective writing classrooms are often highly social places where students share and comment on drafts, listen to each other’s ideas, and sometimes even produce joint texts. Influenced by the work of composition theorist Kenneth Bruffee in the 1980s, many teachers have relied on such collaborative settings to help developing writers expand their repertoire of writing strategies, develop sensitivity to the demands of their potential audiences, and assist each other with revisions and editing.

For such collaboration to happen, students have to know that they will not be criticized or ridiculed for sharing their most tentative ideas or intimate stories. They have to believe that the responses they receive from classmates have value and can be used to improve their writing, both on individual pieces and on their work as a whole. Perhaps most important, they have to trust their teacher as well, and have confidence that their unfinished work, experiments, and struggling efforts will be greeted with respect and usefully targeted instruction.

Experienced writing teachers work to create an atmosphere of community and trust in which students are willing to write honestly, share their work, and provide thoughtful responses to their classmates. Knitting a disparate group of young adults into such a community takes skill and persistence; preventing such communities from unraveling requires attention throughout the time the group is together.

Video Overview

In this video, teachers talk about the importance of building a strong sense of community in their writing classrooms and demonstrate some ways in which they go about doing so. They illustrate the power of participating as a writing member of the classroom community, modeling for students the fits and starts of process to product with examples of their own work. Their attention to the physical details of the classroom—from furniture placement to plants and posters—creates an atmosphere of productive comfort. The teachers also demonstrate some essential activities they use to establish and nurture a sense of trust and community among their students, including sharing their own writing with their students.

As the teachers work with Judith Ortiz Cofer, they demonstrate how a writer translates knowledge of authorship into effective classroom pedagogy. Finally, the teachers explain and exhibit ways in which they encourage students to look to their fellow writing community members and writers outside their community for inspiration, support, collaboration, reactions, and celebration.

Key Points

- Creating and maintaining a sense of community and collaboration in the writing classroom is a crucial part of effective instruction and an ongoing process.
- Experienced writing teachers have learned the power and the value of presenting themselves as engaged writers, telling their stories, struggling with drafts, and benefiting from feedback just as their students do.

- Predictable routines and instructions as well as a conducive physical environment all contribute to the establishment of trust and community within a writing classroom.
- Many writing teachers appreciate the value of talk as a means of helping students explore ideas and possibilities at many different points during their writing.
- Writing communities provide developing writers with opportunities to learn from more experienced writers, either by learning to read like a writer and examining texts to see what works and how it works, or by meeting and listening to working authors.

Learning Objectives

After participating in this session, you will be able to:

- Consider ways to create a physical and psychological space that says to students, “It is safe to write and to share your writing here,”
- Provide opportunities for students to hear and appreciate each other’s many voices and stories, and
- Develop opportunities for students to see you as an active writer, engaged in many of the same processes with which they are working.

The Classrooms in This Video

- Joan Cone, Ph.D. 9th grade. El Cerrito High School, El Cerrito, California
- MaryCarmen Cruz, 9th–12th grade. Cholla High Magnet School, Tucson, Arizona
- Charles Ellenbogen, 11th and 12th grade. Baltimore City College High School, Baltimore, Maryland
- Susie Lebryk-Chao, 12th grade. Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology, Alexandria, Virginia
- Lori Mayo, 9th grade. Far Rockaway High School, Queens, New York
- Kelly Quintero, 12th grade. Huntington High School, Long Island, New York

Featured Voices in the Conversation

- Kyleene Beers
- Lucy Calkins
- Judith Ortiz Cofer
- Joan Cone
- MaryCarmen Cruz

Background Reading

Barbara Gross Davis. “Collaborative Learning: Group Work and Study Teams.” *Tools for Teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993. This chapter is available in the Appendix of this guide.

Optional: For additional resources, visit the *Developing Writers* Web site at www.learner.org/channel/workshops/writedevelop. Select Workshop 2 and Additional Resources.

Workshop Session (On-Site)

Getting Ready (30 minutes)

Discuss

Discuss the following questions:

- What are some of the benefits to be gained by establishing an atmosphere of care and respect in your writing classroom?
- What strategies have you used for developing a community of learners in your writing classroom?
- What challenges have you encountered as you encouraged student collaboration? How have you addressed and met them?

Facilitator: Use the questions below to spark discussion before viewing the workshop program. Participants may write answers to the questions in their workshop journals, as time permits. You may use all of the questions or select only a few.

Reflect in Workshop Journals

Think about your support groups—family, friends, and/or colleagues. How did these support groups develop? What characteristics do they have that make them supportive? In what specific ways or instances have they been helpful to you?

Watch the Workshop Video (60 minutes)

Watch and Discuss

Questions to think about and discuss as you watch the video:

Pause at the title card “Places for Talk.” This follows a segment from the writer’s workshop led by Judith Ortiz Cofer.

- How does the idea of *community* work in your classroom or in classrooms you have known? Think about the Latin root of this word: *communis*, “shared by all or many.”
- How do you set up your classroom to support your writing community?
- What are some of the predictable routines and instructions you use to help students become comfortable with your classroom and its requirements?
- Lori Mayo asks her students to write a letter of introduction as a way of starting to build an atmosphere of comfort and trust. What are some other techniques or activities that have helped you accomplish the same thing?
- Many students write personally for many reasons and often find it comfortable to do so. Think about the best characteristics of that personal writing. What have your student writers learned about their craft that they can rely upon as they write on assigned topics such as extended topical essays, term papers, and the like? How can you best help them explore their strengths as writers and apply them to many different assignments?

Facilitator: If you are watching on videocassette, you may pause at the segments indicated here to give participants opportunities to discuss, reflect, and interact with the program. If needed, rewind and replay segments of the program so that viewers can thoughtfully examine all pertinent information. If you are watching a real-time broadcast, ask participants to consider the questions as they view the program and discuss them later.

You may select any or all of the questions below to discuss, as time permits and according to the interests of your participants. Encourage participants to respond to the questions they didn’t have time to discuss as a group in their journals or on Channel-Talk.

Workshop Session (On-Site), cont'd.

- What strategies that you saw demonstrated in the video would you like to adopt for use in your own classroom? Why do you think they would work well with your students?
- What questions or concerns come to mind as you watch the video?

View program until the end.

- How can talking together about writing and literature help build a sense of community?
- Do you have any favorite “touch-tone” texts that you like to use as models for your students to emulate in their writing? What are they? Why do you find them effective?
- In the video, there were two examples of students working collaboratively on their writing. Compare the two experiences. How could the respective teachers build on these experiences as they progress through the year? Do you have any suggestions for modifying or changing the activity? How might your class react to this kind of experience?
- What do you hope your class accomplishes in a celebratory read-around, such as those you saw in the video, or other sharing experience? How can these experiences enhance community spirit within the classroom?
- How do you know your classroom is clearly functioning as a community of writers?
- What strategies that you saw demonstrated in the video would you like to adopt for use in your own classroom? Why do you think they would work well with your students?
- What questions or concerns come to mind as you watch the video?

Going Further (30 minutes)

In groups of four or five, experiment with collaborative writing. First decide the genre in which you want to write, such as poetry, narrative fiction, or drama. Once you have determined genre, begin to write, being sure that all members of the group are contributing equally. Your group will have 20 minutes to write and 10 minutes to share its efforts and to reflect on the process.

Between Sessions (On Your Own)

Homework Assignment

Journal

Perhaps some projects are more productively completed individually, while others benefit from group effort. Consider recent projects with which you have been involved. In your workshop journal, write about the projects, considering these questions:

- Was individual or collaborative work called for? Could the individual work be shared collaboratively? Could collaborative work be done individually?
- What benefits and what difficulties did you encounter?
- How might your insights transfer to your classroom?

In your journal, you may want to include answers to any remaining questions from this session that you did not have time to discuss, as well as thoughts, questions, and discoveries from the workshop itself and learning experiences that take place in your own classroom.

Reading

In preparation for the next session, read the Background Reading for Workshop 3: "Examining High School and College Writing Expectations." *The Council Chronicle*, May 2003, National Council of Teachers of English. This article is included in the Appendix of this guide.

Optional: For additional resources on topics discussed in this session, visit the *Developing Writers* Web site at www.learner.org/channel/workshops/writedevelop. Select Workshop 2 and Additional Resources.

Teacher Tools

The following Teacher Tools are included with this guide for your use in planning classroom activities:

- Getting Acquainted: Some Suggestions
- Sharing Expectations
- Mixing It Up: Suggestions for Putting Students in Groups
- Building Trust: Teaching Respectful Response

Ongoing Activities

Channel-Talk

Send comments and questions regarding the workshop to other participants around the country with Channel-Talk. Consider sharing ideas that came up as you wrote in your journal, questions you did not have time to discuss in this session, and experiences from your classroom.

The Web Site

Go online for materials and resources to deepen your understanding and implementation of the practices shown in the workshop.

Between Sessions (On Your Own), cont'd.

The Classroom Connection

Student Activities

Try these activities with your students.

- **Teachers as Writers:** Sharing your writing with the classroom community can take many forms. Listening to you read your personal memoir and journal entries can help students get to know you and the things you value in writing. Presenting formal essays, reports, articles, and other writings you have done can help students explore good models to which they can aspire as they tackle more formal writing assignments. If you haven't completed any writing of this nature, consider writing along with your classes on specific assignments and sharing your work as one example of a way to meet the assignment's requirements.
- **Making the Assignment Fit the Student:** The video presented a classroom activity in which students used photographs of themselves to inspire a journal entry. If you would like to offer such an experience to your young writers, remember that not everyone has photographs available for use. Offer students the option of drawing a picture or pictures, bringing in a memento (e.g., a postcard from a vacation), or cutting pictures out of magazines. That way, every student will have a graphic representation of an experience or idea to inspire their writing.

As an alternative to this assignment, present students with a picture of a historic event, a song representative of a decade, or a copy of a famous painting and ask them to construct a cogent essay about the place of this piece of realia in capturing a moment in history.

- **Pass It On Stories:** Arrange students in groups of five. Ask them to work independently, writing the beginning of a story. After three minutes, tell them to finish the sentence they are writing and then stop. Have each student pass his or her story to the person on the right. That person should read what the first student wrote, skip two lines, and continue writing the story for three additional minutes. When time is up, these writers should fold the paper so that the next writer can see only what the second writer has written. Proceed in this manner until every member of the group has contributed to each of the five stories, telling the last writer to bring the story to a conclusion. When the last writer has finished, ask students to unfold the stories and read what they have written. Each group should choose its favorite story to share with the class as a whole.

When the sharing is over, discuss the process. What was easy? What was difficult? How did they resolve their difficulties? What did they learn about writing from this experience?

As a comparative assignment, ask the same groups of five students to complete an extended essay or report related to one of the books you are reading in class. Together, they should delineate a thesis statement for their work and outline various sections that will support their thesis. Once they have completed this part of the activity, students should be given an extended period of time to research, write, and revise their section of the essay or report. They should not share their work with each other. At the conclusion of the activity, student groups should present their entire work, each person reading the part he or she wrote. After the presentation, talk about consistency of voice, tone, and style. Were the groups successful in presenting a cogent essay or report? How did they feel about this process compared to the one in which they created a story?

- **Writer's Celebration:** When students have a finished piece of writing, it is time to share with the entire class. You may wish to do "Read and Clap" as Susie Lebryk-Chao does in her classroom, or you may prefer to try Kelly Quintero's "Gallery Walk" where students respond with sticky notes. Additionally, you may be able to arrange a more public forum for students to share their work. Combining classes with another writing teacher (or half classes at a time if your classroom won't accommodate that many students) gives both groups a chance to share with fresh ears. An after-school invitational where students invite staff and faculty provides a different audience. Sending home several pieces of student work and inviting family members to respond in writing is another way to help students learn to value themselves as a community of writers.

Teacher as a Reflective Practitioner

Consider forming a collaborative study group with three or four other teachers who are writers or who teach writing (they do not all have to work in your school). As a group, choose a book or an article of mutual interest, and, after reading it, meet for an informal discussion. If the experience is successful, consider repeating it on a regular basis.