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Students Learn to Read Like Writers: A Framework for Teachers of Writing

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Abstract

This study provides insight into the role of the elementary school writing teacher in helping students learn to “read like writers” (Smith, 1983). This case study documents how one fourth-grade teacher employed a gradual release of responsibility model as she deliberately planned activities that drew students’ attention to well-crafted writing. Findings indicate that this teacher played an important role in helping her students learn to read like writers and that through carefully crafted lessons she significantly influenced students’ knowledge of and implementation of crafting techniques.

“Good writing,” as defined by one fourth grader in this study, “feels good to your ears.” This definition, while brief, encapsulates many of the qualities of good writing yet leaves teachers wondering how to help young writers produce the kind of writing that is pleasing to the ear. Writing is a complex process that requires the divided attention of the writer, who must focus on the intended message, the conventions of print and spelling, and the crafting of the message with word choice and sentence variation. Many teachers of writing lament that they are much more comfortable teaching writing conventions than the writer’s craft, leaving the more subtle aspects of writing to chance (Fletcher & Portalupi, 1998). Unfortunately, writers cannot fully develop with instruction that focuses only on the conventions of writing; rather, instruction must also target the writer’s craft (National Commission on Writing, 2003). The craft of writing includes the incorporation of literary elements such as strong leads and powerful endings (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001), as

well as the more subtle aspects of word choice, phrasing, and voice (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1996).

Quality children's literature holds potential for serving as models for well-crafted writing and can play an important role in teaching the craft of writing (Avery, 2002; Calkins, 1994; Graves, 1983; Ray, 1999). Frank Smith (1983) explains that a great number of children learn to write with only a small amount of instructional time devoted to writing. Therefore, he believes "it could only be through reading that writers learn all the intangibles that they know" (p. 558). This notion of reading like a writer is the premise upon which this study is based.

While Smith (1983) does not address the role of the teacher in enabling students to read like writers, drawing upon the social constructivist theory of learning, the researcher argues that the teacher plays a critical role in the process. Acknowledging that learning is a social process and is influenced by the social context in which it occurs (Jaramillo, 1996; Palincsar, 1998), the individuals who surround the learner play a vital role in the learning process. Therefore, the primary research question that guided this study was, "What role does the teacher play in helping students learn to read like writers?"

Reading Like a Writer

The term "well-crafted writing" is synonymous with "good writing;" therefore, the writer must carefully craft the writing so that the reader views it as worthy of reading (Graves, 2004). Numerous individuals have attempted to define or at least identify qualities of good writing, yet the definition is still vague and subjective. Though difficult to define, most individuals agree that they know good writing when they hear it. Worsham (2001) believed that good writers appeal to the senses; evoking vivid images and scenes in the mind of the reader. Noted children's author Mem Fox (1999) stated that good writing comes from writers who care about how their writing sounds to the reader. Writers who care, take the time to read every word, phrase, and sentence aloud over and over, "listening for the slightest hiccup in the rhythm" (Fox, 1999, p. 195). If writers are to produce good writing themselves, they must develop an ear for recognizing it (Heard, 2002). Burrows, Jackson, and Saunders (1984) found that even young writers could develop an ear for quality writing and could learn "to select patterns that give vigor and verve to their writing" (p. 7). The goal of reading like a writer then is to encourage the reader to identify

qualities of good writing and to further expand their current repertoire of crafting techniques (Portalupi, 1999). The ideas of reading like a writer and writing mentors are relatively new concepts in the school setting but not in the community of professional writers. Many published writers learned to write by studying the work of other authors (Fearn, 1989; Ray, 1999; Rylant, 1990) and by reading the works of the men and women who were doing the kind of writing they wanted to do (Anderson, 2000; Zinsser, 1994).

Just as professional writers study examples of other writing pieces in the genre they are trying to produce (Hillocks, 1986), children can learn about the craft of writing by listening to and reading quality literature (Ray, 2004). The awareness of the rhythm and cadence that is characteristic of quality writing can be learned by reading (Barrs, 2000; Titus, 1998) and “can determine how we come to think words should sound on the page” (Romano, 2004, p. 6). That awareness of how words should flow together is so strongly influenced by the texts we read that it is difficult to separate ourselves from what we have read. The texts become a part of who we are as writers. Ray (1999) reminds us that, “When we write we are not doing something that hasn’t been done before. Everything we do as writers, we have known in some fashion as readers first” (p. 18).

Building on the proclamation made by Frank Smith (1983) that individuals must read like writers in order to learn all they need to communicate effectively, numerous studies have addressed the effects of reading on children’s writing (Barrs, 2000; Calkins, 1985; Dressel, 1990; Eckhoff, 1984; Langer & Flihan, 2000; Lancia, 1997; Surmay, 2000). The first group of studies focused on how students’ writing was influenced by the books they read or by the books read to them. Eckhoff (1984) found that children’s writing mimicked the styles of the books they read. In this study, students in one classroom read from Basal A that closely matched the literary style of commercially produced children’s literature. The students in the other classroom read from Basal B, which consisted of a simplified, controlled-vocabulary style typically found in basal series. The results indicated that the Basal A children produced writing with more elaborate sentence structures than the students who read from Basal B, whose writing was consistent with the simple sentences of the Basal B series. In other words, the students wrote the kind of stories they read. They were reading like writers. During an eight week study of 48 fifth graders, Dressel (1990) found that students who listened to high quality literature daily incorporated more literary traits than those who listened to literature of lesser quality. In this case,

children's writing was not just influenced by what they read but by what was read to them. Finally, Barrs (2000) analyzed the effects two mentor texts had on the writing of 108 Year 5 students in two London classrooms. By measuring syntactic complexity, Barrs determined that the sentence structures in students' writing mirrored those of the mentor texts. Again, students were reading like writers.

Other studies focused more specifically on the elements of craft that students borrowed from texts. Calkins (1985) found that young writers included "About the Author" blurbs and prefaces in their own writing because they noticed those features in many books they read. Lancia (1997) coined the term "literary borrowing" when students in his second-grade classroom borrowed plot, characters, and plot devices from the classroom literature collection. He found that the structure provided by published authors served as a "jumping off point" for the student's own writing. Finally, Langer and Flihan (2000) reported that students who read and studied poetry incorporated imagery and repetition in their own writing. While these studies reveal that many students do, in fact, learn to read like writers, they do little to explain how this happens. Informed by these studies and perspectives, the purpose of this study was to examine and describe the seemingly critical role of the teacher in helping students read like writers.

The Study

This study was conducted in a fourth-grade classroom at a district charter school in a large urban school district in the southwest. The ethnic distribution of students at the school was as follows: 10% African American, 69% Hispanic, 18% White, <1% Native American, and 2% Asian/Pacific Islander. Eighty-three percent of the students were classified as economically disadvantaged and 7 percent of the students were classified as Limited English Proficient (LEP). The mobility rate was 35 percent.

Ellen (pseudonyms are used throughout), a fourth-grade teacher, was entering her sixth year of teaching when this study began. She was selected because she possessed understandings of certain aspects of writing instruction that were critical to this study. For example, she understood that writing workshop was an instructional format used to guide children in the process of writing. Like the workshop approach described by Calkins (1994), in Ellen's classroom, writing workshop occurred on a daily basis for approximately one hour. Each workshop began with a 10 - 15 minute

mini lesson, followed by 30 – 40 minutes of independent writing. The workshop concluded with a 5-10 minute share time. Within the context of writing workshop, the students had choice in the topic, genre, and audience, which was important because it encouraged students to go beyond formulaic writing, and allowed them to develop their unique writing voices.

Though the focus of the study was on the role of the teacher as she helped students learn to employ the craft of writing, evidence was needed that the students were, in fact, using the craft elements the teacher taught. Evidence of students' understanding was found in the writing samples the students created on a daily basis and in the field notes collected during the writing workshop time. Taking into account all elements of writing, quality of the message, use of conventions, and evidence of craft, the teacher nominated six case study students who represented the range of writing abilities in her classroom – two self-extending writers, two transitional writers, and two early writers (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001).

Data Collection

The researcher adopted the stance of observer as participant, primarily observing the study's context but carefully selecting moments of participation (Glesne, 1999; Merriam, 1988). As a participant observer, the researcher was able to witness the phenomenon firsthand (Merriam, 1988) enabling her to make sense of the complex classroom context because she saw each piece of the environment that affected the eventual outcome. Moderate interaction with the participants allowed the researcher to probe for more information through informal conversations with the students and teacher. One such interaction was initiated by the teacher at the very beginning of the study when, after several conferences with students, she approached the researcher and said, "I have a tough group. I have some very reluctant writers." A brief conversation ensued about how the teacher was supporting those reluctant writers. On another occasion, the researcher was observing Anthony, one of the case study students. His story began with, "One day in the fairly month of May..." As she leaned over to read his writing, the researcher was unable to read "fairly" so she asked him what that word was. He said, "Fairly. I took it from that song, 'One day in the fairly month of May.'" He then proceeded to sing the first few bars of the song. This interaction allowed the researcher to identify other sources of inspiration that the students were using in their writing. Clinging to the advice of Wolcott (1990) she "talk[ed] little [and] listen[ed] a lot" (p. 127).

Data collection began in late August and occurred two to three days a week for approximately four months. The final data set included detailed field notes from 17 writing workshop lessons, two transcribed writing workshop lessons, transcripts from two teacher and six case study student interviews, and various documents including photographs, writing samples from the case study students, the teacher's schedule, and a listing of books the teacher reported sharing with her students outside of the writing workshop.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed to explore how the teacher helped her students learn about the craft of writing by reading like writers and how she encouraged students to employ those crafting techniques in their own writing. The researcher read the field notes in their entirety, keeping in mind ideas commonly associated with writing workshop, such as choice, response, routines, and time. These codes were then grouped into themes of literature, craft, conventions, conditions for writing, routines, and researcher/teacher interactions.

After determining the themes in the data, field notes were read again to determine the teacher's role. Questions that guided this portion of data analysis were: 1) What was the teacher doing?; 2) How was she using literature?; 3) How was she creating conditions for writing?; and 4) How was she teaching students about the craft of writing? Particular attention was paid to the language the teacher used, the focus of the mini lessons, the time spent on each part of the writing workshop, and the presentation style of the mini lessons. This portion of data analysis allowed the researcher to describe the teacher's role as facilitator and mediating agent (Kozulin, Gindis, Ageyev, & Miller, 2003). The codes were subsequently applied to the transcribed lessons and results were then compared to the field notes, further strengthening the themes.

Findings

During the initial teacher interview, Ellen stated that she considered herself to be a writer as prior to her teaching career, she worked as a journalist for a local newspaper. She revealed that she loved writing in high school and dreamed of writing her own book someday. These experiences influenced the way Ellen taught writing and shaped the way she taught her students to read like writers. Because she was a writer herself, she was sensitive to the struggles and challenges that writers

face (Graves, 2004), and she made it her goal to show students that writing could be fun and rewarding.

Ellen adopted a social constructivist approach to learning in that she carefully fashioned a classroom environment that promoted “learning as a social process rather than individual phenomena” (Kozulin, et al., p. 1). She encouraged talk during the writing workshop and supported collaborative learning. The students in her classroom learned about writing not only from Ellen, but from their peers as well.

Interestingly, Ellen’s interactions with the six case study students during the writing workshop were strikingly similar. Even with the range of abilities from early writer to self-extending writer, she treated all of them like accomplished writers. An outside observer would have been unable to detect the differences in writing levels simply by watching the teacher interact with the students as Ellen expected all of them to be successful writers and even compared their writing to children’s literature. For example, when Isaiah, one of the early writers, shared his story, Ellen stated, “That was a good story, almost as good as *Pete’s a Pizza*” (Steig, 1998). She often spoke to them as fellow writers. On one occasion, Valerie was struggling to keep her piece focused. During the writing conference, the teacher put herself in the young writer’s place by saying, “It seems to me that you have three good ideas. I think what I might do is separate them and give each a title.”

While the four male case study students tended to be more vocal during the whole group mini lessons and sharing time, the two female case study students were equally active during one-on-one conferences. Regardless of the level of the writer with whom she was conferring, Ellen always let the writer take the lead. Almost every one-on-one conference began with the student making a comment about his/her writing like, “I don’t know what else to add” or, “I’m trying to think of another way to say this.” The main difference among the case study students was the level of support that Ellen provided during some of the writing conferences. The early and transitional writers sometimes needed more guidance in crafting their writing during the individual writing conferences. For instance, when conferring with Timothy about his planning web, Ellen noticed that it was very broad, so she asked him to be more specific. “Will this web help you remember all of the details that you want to include? You could add other bubbles coming off the family bubble to help jog your memory.” This suggestion allowed Timothy to move forward as a writer.

Studying the Art of Language

Ellen was very familiar with Katie Wood Ray's (1999) framework for supporting the noticing of *Wondrous Words* and the habit of reading like a writer, as there was evidence of Ray's work influencing Ellen's approach for helping her students learn to read like writers. Ray's (1999) framework consists of five steps: "1) notice; 2) make a theory; 3) name it; 4) relate it to other texts; and 5) envision it in your own writing" (p. 120). Ellen chose a framework of 1) noticing; 2) guided practice; and 3) trying it.

In order for young writers to begin employing the writer's craft in independent writing samples, they must first be made aware of well-crafted writing. They must hear the sound of good writing and develop an ear for recognizing it and an eye for noticing it in print. In other words, they must learn to read like writers (Smith, 1983). Accordingly, Ellen spent a great deal of time helping students learn the craft of writing by recognizing it in well-crafted literature (Ray, 1999). In the subsequent paragraphs, her approach is first described and examples of ways that she developed her students' understanding of the craft of writing are provided; followed by a description of ways Ellen helped students employ the craft of writing independently.

Helping Students Learn to Read Like Writers

Ellen's writing instruction centered on the craft of writing. All of the seventeen mini lessons observed during this study related to craft. Ellen helped her students learn about the craft of writing by providing models of good writing and by asking them to notice well-crafted writing (Ray, 1999). She also deliberately planned activities that required them to read like writers. The following examples illustrate her approach.

During one mini lesson, Ellen copied a page from the popular picture book *Thunder Cake* (Polacco, 1997) onto a transparency. After reading the text aloud, she said, "Tell me some words that you think are describing words, or naming words, or that just stand out as special." As the students identified words and phrases like "grease stained pages," "surveyed," "lovingly," and "scurried," Ellen underlined them on the transparency. By asking the students to notice the words, she conveyed the message that they, too, could identify good writing. When asked how she drew students' attention to well-crafted writing, Ellen explained:

Especially at first, I'm very deliberate about it. If I see something that's worth pointing out, I will stop and point it out to them. And now, I've turned over that job to them and so they find things that they want to bring up or discuss and talk about.

By employing the gradual release of responsibility model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983), she was steadily turning the task of noticing good writing over to the students. This "turning over of responsibility" was especially evident during the sharing time. Ellen sometimes asked, "Did you hear anything you liked in her writing?" Students made comments such as, "It's a good story because of the details you used." Ellen encouraged the students to extend their comments:

Ellen: Can you give an example?

Valerie: Like when the snake went "ssss." That was really good when you did that.

As the study progressed, the students began to notice more and more craft elements in their peers' writing. For example, during sharing time the students noticed interesting phrases in Katherine's story as they identified the phrases "steamy day," "strange looking van," and "stars in my eyes" as well-crafted writing. Ellen rarely needed to comment on the description in a student's story as the students did it for her. On the final day of observation, Ellen chose to read *Appellemando's Dream* (Polacco, 1997). She gave each student a note card and explained:

Every time you hear something in this story that you think is "Wow, fantastic!" that you think is worth using in your own stories sometime, I want you to jot it down and make a little note to yourself so that at the end of the book, you'll be ready to share it with the rest of the class. By the time I get to the end of this book, I'm assuming and I expect that you will have at *least* a few things written down. As I'm reading you need to be listening carefully to the words that Patricia Polacco uses. If you hear something in there that you think is really spectacular, you need to write it down.

Ellen's language indicated her belief that the students could identify good writing and would know when they heard it. Interactions like those described above trained students to read like writers and led to the use of those newly discovered crafting techniques in their own writing.

Helping Students Learn to Write Like Writers

Helping students learn to read like writers was the first step in helping them learn to write like writers. Ellen was deliberate about helping them learn to employ the craft of writing. She did this by (a) pointing out well-crafted writing, (b) engaging the students in guided practice, and (c) asking them to “try it” during independent practice (see Figure 1).

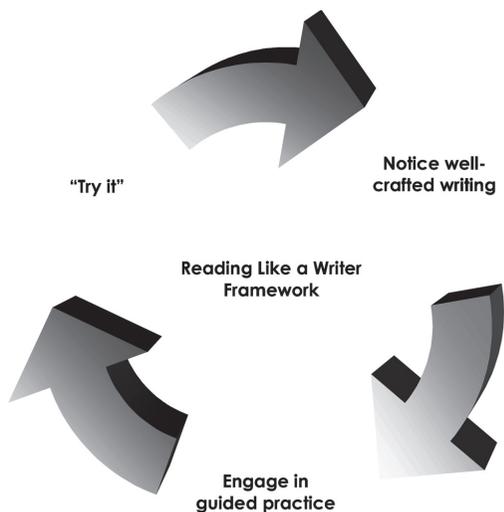


Figure 1. Reading Like a Writer Framework

As an example, after identifying interesting words and phrases from the page in *Thunder Cake* (Polacco, 1997), Ellen modeled how to borrow words and phrases from Polacco’s story to create her own original poem. The next part of the lesson served as guided practice as she reminded the students that it was acceptable to borrow ideas and phrases from other authors if the students used them in their own way. Using the words they selected as unique and interesting, the students and teacher wrote a poem entitled Storm (see Figure 2). Ellen guided the students through the process:

Ellen: Tell me some of the words that kind of go together.

Timothy: Black clouds.

Ellen: Do I have other words in here that might support the black clouds idea?

Katherine: Thick.

Ellen: Let's start like this, "Thick, black clouds." (She wrote the words on the overhead transparency.) In Patricia Polacco's story, she didn't say anything about the clouds being thick. That's our idea. Is there anything else?

Katherine: Thick, black clouds gather.

Ellen: Okay. (Wrote "gather" at the end of the line.)

By the end of the lesson, the students and teacher had written an original poem using some of Polacco's words.

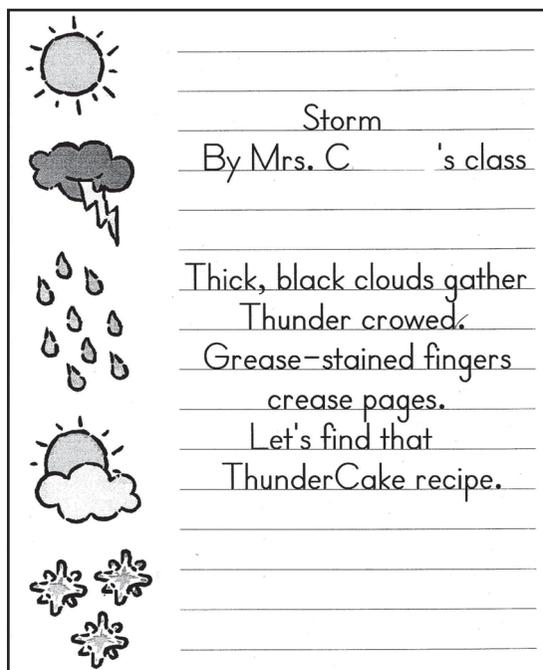


Figure 2. Class Created Poem, Storm

To set the idea of borrowing words and phrases from other authors firmly in the minds of her students, Ellen asked them to write their own *Thunder Cake* poems. Each student selected and highlighted twenty of Polacco's interesting words and used some of them to write poems (see Figures 3 & 4). Again, independent practice was used to reenforce and encourage the employment of a crafting strategy.

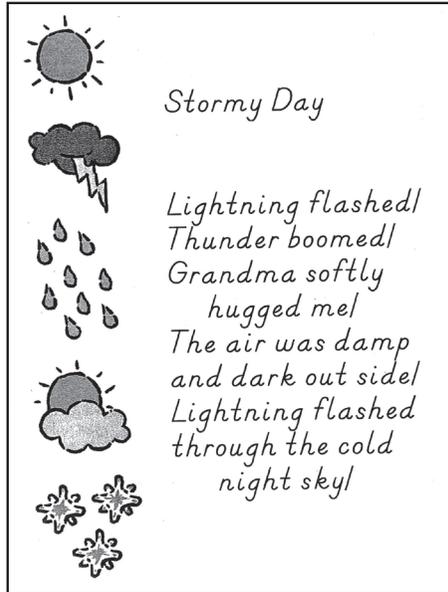


Figure 3. Student Created Poem, Stormy Day

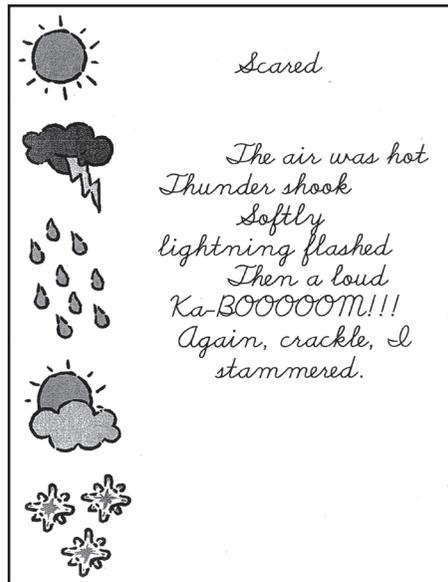


Figure 4. Student Created Poem, Scared

On other occasions, Ellen exposed her students to different ways to begin stories by reading leads from various picture books. After categorizing the different types of leads, Ellen supported her students' use of these leads by teaching several mini lessons. She began by asking

Ellen: Yesterday, we talked about beginnings and revisions of beginnings. What does that mean?

Anthony: To rewrite the beginning

Ellen: Why would you do that?

Isiah: To try to make a better story.

Ellen: Yesterday, we did a "try it." We talked about lots of different ways to start a story. We focused on "setting" beginnings. Today, I want to read you a different kind [of lead]. I'm going to read three examples. See what's the same.

Ellen read the first sentence from *Westlandia* (Fleischman, 2002), *Hey, Little Ant*, (Hoose & Hoose, 1998), and *Grandpa's Teeth* (Clement, 1999). After the students identified the lead as a "dialogue lead," Ellen engaged the students in guided practice and asked three students to share the first sentence of the story they were currently writing. She then showed the class how to change their first sentences into a dialogue lead. After the mini lesson, Ellen stated:

You are going to do another "try it." Today, I want you to try a dialogue beginning. You may have to rearrange your ideas a bit. I just want you to try it. Remember that in *Westlandia*, the dialogue makes us want to find out why Wesley is so miserable.

Ellen taught several more lessons on borrowing words and phrases from other authors. By the end of the study, students were borrowing not only from published authors, but from the teacher and fellow students as well. Jasmine incorporated the phrase "mass chaos" into her story after hearing it in Ellen's, and Missy began her story with the phrase, "It was a grueling hot day..." The students noticed the similarities between these students' stories and Ellen's, but the teacher reassured the class that it was acceptable to borrow from other authors, including her, as long as they made the writing their own. Ellen considered this practice favorable and continued to encourage it and the students obliged by reading like writers and incorporating the crafting techniques into their own writing.

What was Ellen's role in helping students employ the craft of writing and write like writers? This fourth-grade teacher stated that the only way she knew how to teach it was "through read alouds and talking about what you notice." By surrounding her students with models of good writing, Ellen helped them learn to employ the craft of writing. When asked how her teacher helped her become a better writer, case study student Valerie explained that by reading books the teacher helped them get topics for writing and ideas for word choice. Ellen taught her students to follow the lead of successful authors as the practice of borrowing words and phrases from other authors was encouraged. These students understood that, as Josh stated "Even good authors borrow stuff from other books."

As a writer herself, Ellen had a clear vision of where she was headed with her students. Her path for getting there was well marked. During her final interview, she stated, "I don't like to write just for the fun of it, just for myself, but I *am* a writer. I know how it should flow and I have a good idea of what to do next." Deliberate teaching drew students' attention to the writer's craft and deliberate teaching helped them learn to employ it. Using the steps of modeling, supporting with guided practice, and allowing for independent practice, Ellen encouraged the incorporation of crafting techniques.

Insights into the Role of the Teacher in Helping Students Read Like Writers

Ellen's students noticed well-crafted writing because she deliberately planned for and engaged them in activities that drew their attention to the words in the texts. Like many other quality teachers of writing, she gave her students multiple opportunities to practice writing. What set her apart from other teachers, though, was the way she supported students in their independent practice. After noticing interesting word choice or a crafting technique, Ellen modeled how a writer might use the technique in his or her own writing by engaging them in guided practice. Following the guided practice she required students to "try it" in their own writing.

Several aspects of Ellen's approach were influenced by Ray (1999), including her practice of noticing and naming a crafting technique. Ellen's approach contrasted with Ray's (1999), however, because rather than asking students to "envision using this crafting in [their] own writing," (p. 120) she required students to "try it" on one of their writing pieces. While Ray (1999) cautions teachers against

always ending focus lessons with “guided and independent practice,” (p. 233) Ellen explained her rationale in this way:

If I teach a technique, then I have them sample it or “try it” on one of their compositions. And they don’t have to go with that, but just try it and see if it works, because I feel like they need to see what it would look like. I think it gives them confidence [that they can use the technique independently].

Implications for Practice

Teachers of writing who want to further the development of the writers’ craft can employ the Reading Like a Writer Framework (see Figure 1) presented in this article. Beginning with the sharing of quality literature, teachers can fill the classroom with sounds of writing that are pleasing to the ear as repeated readings of well-crafted literature are just like a good song on the radio that plays on and on in the mind of the listener. The crafting techniques present in quality literature that is shared over and over can spring forth from the recesses of the mind at a moment’s notice. Teachers who engage in the practice of reading like a writer themselves are better able to help students learn to read like writers. These teachers notice well-crafted writing while reading for pleasure, while reading the writing of their students, and while reading aloud to the students in their classes.

Though all crafting techniques might not have names, teachers can pause as they read a particularly striking phrase or sentence. They might even reread it again for emphasis. Over time, as students develop awareness of the written word, teachers can begin to turn over the task of noticing to the students. Once a crafting technique has been identified as one that is within the students’ current writing potential, teachers can engage students in guided practice, with the whole class employing that technique on a common piece of writing. After modeling how the technique might be used, teachers can ask the students to “try it” on an old or current piece of writing. As the students engage in this independent practice, teachers confer with individual students, noting the use of the technique. Following the writing and conferring time of the writing workshop, teachers might select one or two students to share their “try it” attempts. By taking the time to celebrate the students’ attempts, teachers reinforce the idea that young writers can use the crafting techniques of professional writers.

The findings from this study extend the field of writing by providing insight into the role that teachers play in helping students learn to read like writers. The gradual release of responsibility model commonly employed in other areas of literacy development can also serve as a framework for helping students learn about the craft of writing. Paired with quality literature, this framework allows teachers to play an active role in helping all students learn to read like writers. In turn, students who learn to read like writers may well continue to grow as writers.



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