

How Can I Improve My Practice and Motivate My Students To Improve Their Story Writing?

By Maureen Clarke



I am continually striving to make improvements to my writing program. For some reason, I feel the writing component in my Grade three class needs to be refined and reworked. Having struggled with a desire to purposefully do something about it, I decided to participate in Action Research.

Last year I completed my Reading Specialist. In working through the components for this course, I noticed that the required text, *Conversations* by Regie Routman, devoted four chapters to the teaching of writing. In reading these chapters, I realized that many of her suggestions were practical and made good sense. These activities were just what I was looking for to motivate both myself and my students to write meaningful stories.

In her book, Routman wrote, “for students to be engaged in their writing, it is important that they see an actual purpose to it.” (Routman 332) Simple enough. While keeping this in mind, I generated a list of the type of writing I engage in: list of things needed to be done at home; a list of food to buy; a list of things to get ready for school; thank you cards; newsletters; report cards; awards for student success; notes to parents; communication in agendas; email messages. Essentially not much “personal” writing was happening.

I shared the above list with my students. And made note of, how over the course of the year, we would learn how to write in multiple genres, comparing the list generated at the end of the year with the list above.

I then asked my students to complete a writing on demand assignment. I felt as though I needed to establish a baseline of each student’s writing ability. Therefore students were provided with a journal (a lined notebook) to complete writing assignments in. The prompt, on this the first day of school, Today I feel... Students were not given any directions except to write until asked to stop.

Some examples of student writing are:

Today I feel happy because I’m finally in third grade. I am so happy I made it this far. (Dylan)

Today I felt at the beginning very nervous because I thought it would be very hard but at the end it was very fun. (Sonia)

This writing provided valuable insight into student ability to write sentences, use description, create imagery, engage the reader, communicate clearly and finally, motivation to write.

I could see that I had my work cut out for me. Some students wrote one sentence, others a paragraph or two. Some wanted every word spelled correctly while others confidently wrote without concern for spelling. Still others needed thinking time while some quickly recorded how they felt.

What next? Routman talks of, “Interviews are a great way for class members to get to know one another and help build community in the classroom.” (Routman 387) I also know and value that students need models of writing techniques. During the first week of school, I set about teaching my class about interviews. We brainstormed what an interview was, why we interview others, how an interview is conducted, how the information is shared. Then we did a shared writing session to generate initial questions for our interviews.

While students were engaged in their poems, I would take a break and observe their work. Often I would interrupt the class and state, “Wow! I have something that I want to share and celebrate with you.” I made sure to always ask permission before sharing with the class.

Thunderstorms
 dark, grey
 sky
 thunder
 lightning
 softly raining
 raining harder
 wet
 scared
 BOOM!
 Darkness.

By Ashay

Sharing their work this way benefits everyone by: reinforcing what the writer has done well and encourages him/her to continue; shows what a good poem looks and sounds like; gives students ideas for their own writing and sets expectations for quality.” (Routman 377)

I wrestled with this process because I was initially concerned that students would just copy others. I found however that in sharing these successes, students were then motivated to have their poem showcased by the teacher and were motivated to make their work better.

After a few days of writing and showcasing, we began to conclude our writing time by

sharing our work. This provided an opportunity for all students to share their work. The audience was invited to comment on things that they liked about the poem as well as suggestions to make the poem better. The use of sticky notes, which the teacher recorded suggestions on, engaged many more students in the sharing process. It seemed that suddenly students thought that getting a sticky note was important and validated their work.

Students also knew that we were working toward creating an anthology similar to the one made by last year’s class. Another motivating factor, and that they needed one poem for publication. They were looking forward to seeing their work in a published format. However, I did reinforce that not all of their work would be published. They needed to select their best poem for publication.

The format of minilesson, followed by a period of sustained writing and concluding with whole-group sharing proved to be invaluable during the teaching of “capture the moment.” (Routman 346). Defined as, “creating a realistic moment that the reader is able to step right into.” (Routman 346).

At first, the students struggled with this, as did I. But with time. Practice and feedback, we produced wonderful results.

I modeled the writing of a moment in time, using plenty description and detail. Hoping students would be able to place themselves within my writing. We used the following to guide our writing: “What’s happening? What do you see? What do you hear? What are you feeling? What do you smell? What are you thinking?” (Routman 347) After much modeling, discussing, guiding and use of sticky notes, students effectively captured moments.

The Zipper

by Drew

The last ride I went on at the C.N.E. in Toronto: My dad tells me about the first time he went on the Zipper while we walk slowly toward the ride. I felt like the bottom of my stomach dropped out. It took twenty minutes to get on the ride. It felt like forever. We strapped ourselves in. Then it started going up, up, up then all of a sudden WHOOSH! It flew violently downward. I could hear screams and change hitting the ground. It flipped and dipped over and over again. I was slipping out of my seat. My dad had to hold me in my seat. I felt like I was going to fall out of my seat. I think I could get out without any help. My hands and eyes hurt. When we finally got off, I could barely walk. We walked around for a while. I felt queasy. I didn't eat much lunch. We then walked to my aunt's house to prepare for the horrible, long drive home.

With the success of writing I was witnessing in my class, I decided to continue to implement new ideas into my program. Some types of writing I taught to my students were: book reviews; lists; letters; advice; report writing; story quilts; posters; endorsements; instructions and messages.

I also found myself to enjoy teaching writing. The students were engaged and demonstrating their enjoyment of writing as well.

Writing also occurred at a variety of times during the day. Traditionally, my writing was taught and practiced during a writing block. Now I was beginning to have students write during math, science, social studies, art and drama without stifling their creativity. I feel this was managed through the variety of writing I was expecting from my students.

I would also like to think that this practice of integrating writing was occurring already, but it is not wise to assume that something is happening until you take a good look at your classroom practice.

The next hurdle, story writing. In the past, many students have come to me with a variety of ideas of what writing a story involves. Initially I got stories one page in length, a jumbled mix of ideas, without a clear beginning or middle and often they ended with THE END written boldly on the last line. This was all about to change.

I have always believed that reading and writing are woven tightly together. I really see the value of a variety of opportunities for reading in classrooms. I relied on this to facilitate story writing in my class.

The initial whole group story writing lesson began with a discussion around and the recording of the student's ideas of what makes a good story:

- pictures
- hard words
- mystery- you do not know what is going to happen
- suspense
- scary- you cannot go to sleep
- information- you can learn things
- explanations- depth, imagination
- clear, the reader can understand it

I was able to guide students by suggesting they think about their favourite story and consider what makes it so good.

Routman refers to another book to assist in the writing of fiction, Marion Dane Bauer's "What's Your Story? A Young Person's Guide to Writing Fiction (1992). I made use of this book in my classroom often reading highlighted passages to my students to help illustrate my expectations.

Once we had our list generated, we began by focusing on character development. We developed a character as a class and then students individually created their own. The following questions were used to guide us in our writing: Who is the Character? What does he/she want? What is the problem? What kind of struggle will the character have going after his/her goal? How will he/she succeed or fail? Students would write, share and revise their writing during character development. I encouraged them to write from their personal experiences.

The next step was telling details. Students were encouraged to record specific details to help bring their characters to life. A homework assignment was to observe a member of their family and note descriptive details about appearance and behaviour. As well, during read alouds, students were encouraged to listen for details and record them.

References

Raitman, Reggie. Conversations