
Writing Workshop for K-6 Success: Foundations for a Literate Democracy

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Writing, not unlike the craft of architectural design, takes years to develop and refine. Developing the craft of writing takes on-going practice, expert modeling, guidance, patience, feedback and encouragement. Not until I returned to a college graduate program did I realize this truth ... but could I believe it?

Have you ever been awed by a teaching method you've read about, wanting only to *see* "proof" that it really works? A few years ago, as a new college writing teacher, I wanted desperately to see a successful writing workshop, where writers learn and practice the craft of writing. While progressive education theory and pedagogy are widely published and available to educators, we are seldom provided opportunities to observe them in practice. In the fall of 2004, however, I was lucky enough to stumble into just such an experience. Pat Isbell, my son's 4th grade teacher in Duluth, Minnesota, provided a model for writing workshop I could learn from and believe in, and even though she teaches 3rd and 4th graders while I teach different aged adult learners, she became for me "a teacher's teacher" (Graves *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work*). Today, my enthusiasm and belief in Isbell's approach to teaching writing have inspired me to share her story with others in hopes that K-12 educators around the state will take time to reflect on their own writing pedagogy and curriculum. I believe using a workshop approach

to teach writing provides us possibility to transform not only literacy education, but the state of our democracy. In this essay I weave a story inspired by my volunteer experience in Isbell's writing workshop into commentary on why we, as educators across all developmental stages of writing, might look to Isbell in shaping our own classroom practices.

Teaching as a reflective practice is no new or earth-shattering revelation. Good teachers think about and assess their own methods and interactions with students daily and work to shape their practices year after year to best suit student learning and achievement. But what about writing? Were you provided specific instruction and effective modeling for how to teach your students to write? In what ways has this training served you and your students? According to Carl Nagin's *Because Writing Matters: Improving Student Writing in Our Schools*, most teachers receive little or no instruction on teaching writing. In fact, literacy training in most elementary certification programs focuses solely on reading methods, with little or no exposure to writing pedagogy (17).¹ This is cause for concern since writing has been identified as a primary way for students to learn and demonstrate their learning in all disciplines. Fortunately, research shows that teachers who are provided on-going support and enrichment opportunities to learn about effective writing practices can, and do, create environments and communities of practice that make "a difference in both the writing and the writing lives of [their] students" (Ray 107). Pat Isbell is one of these teachers. Her journey of professional development is one of success for her students and inspiration for fellow teachers.

Evolution of Writing Workshop

Writing workshop, as a natural step to putting "process theory" into practice, has been discussed and written about now for well over a quarter of a century.² Still, even in progressive education communities across the country, it is rare to find the workshop method encouraged and practiced successfully. My recent graduate training at the University of Minnesota Duluth exposed me to workshop literature, such as Donald Murray's

A Writer Teaches Writing, but not to writing classrooms employing the holistic, student-centered approach Murray describes. As a fairly new college composition instructor, my major goal has been to develop a workshop environment where students come prepared to talk about and respond to each other's texts. Getting students to recognize themselves as writers, to take pride in what they write, and to realize the importance of their own voice in the world are "ideals" I am struggling to put to work in my classroom. Yet this kind of self-perception is just plain unfamiliar for most college students, pointing to the fact that such process-oriented practices are missing at the K-12 level. As one student commented recently: "You talk to us and treat us like we're all writers, but we're not. We just have to take the course to graduate." So, my desire to highlight Isbell's success is driven by my dream not only for a more literate and active electorate, but also for the more practical and immediate outcome of seeing students arrive in my college classroom ready to engage one another as thoughtful, reflective writers.

"The word *story* derives from the Greek *eidenai*, meaning 'to know'" (Atwell 3). *Ms. Iona's Gift* was written to acknowledge and celebrate Isbell's methods of teaching writing and articulates what I came to know and understand about writing workshop by seeing it "really work" for her students over the school year. The story was primarily written to help the children of Isbell's classroom realize the importance of their writing workshop and its lasting impact on their lives. As Donald Graves states in *A Fresh Look at Writing*, "if students had one good teacher of writing in their entire career ... they could be successful writers" (14). I believed Isbell was that teacher and wanted her students to believe it, too. With the help of Linda Hagstrom, a student teacher at the time who now uses writing workshop in her own classroom, and Deanne Barta, a retired Kindergarten teacher, the children illustrated the text for *Ms. Iona's Gift*. We kept the book a surprise until the last week of school when we presented it to Isbell at a party in her honor. Isbell's favorite color is purple; her fictional name "Iona" means *purple jewel*. The story is a vision for how we teach writing and how the

responsive setting we create can profoundly impact our world.

Ms. Iona's Gift

Once upon a time, in a land of cold weather, many lakes, and sturdy, smart, and ingenious people, existed a class of 3rd and 4th grade students. These were not just ordinary students. You see their teacher, one of the many sturdy, smart, and ingenious people of the land, bestowed special powers upon her students each and every day. Their teacher, Ms. Iona, was a scholar in how to turn ordinary school children into extraordinary thinkers, incredible storytellers, and masters of imagination. Ms. Iona also had the good fortune of teaching in a warm and welcoming school that valued new ideas and approaches to teaching and learning.



This story began one Tuesday during my volunteer time in Isbell's classroom at Chester Park Lab School in Duluth, Minnesota. On this particular day late in the school year, I had no students to confer with during writing workshop. Recalling the importance of writing with students (Murray; Spandel; Graves)³, I asked one of the children for some notebook paper. I thought for a few minutes and began to write. Looking up, I noticed several students watching me, while others moved to the conference table and quietly asked what I was writing. I said it was a story about writing workshop. They asked, "Our writing workshop?"

I said “Yes, this writing workshop.” They asked me to read it to them and wondered who would be in it and what would happen. I told them I needed time to write in order to ‘find out’ what would happen, illustrating unknowingly the sought-after element of surprise, where a writer cannot tell what might show up on the page once they begin writing (Murray *A Writer Teaches Writing* 3; 107).

Her heart set on a career in acting, Isbell’s first degree and career was in theater. She loved working with children in stage productions and decided on teaching for a second career. Isbell taught 2nd, 3rd, and 4th grades in Duluth for a few years before entering graduate school in 2002. Teaching writing was a frustration for Isbell from early on. She does not recall getting instruction in her teacher training on *how* to teach writing, but rather *what* curriculum to expect. Isbell even admits she avoided spending classroom time on lessons in writing due to the lack of results she saw in student work. Most of her writing assignments were responses to textbook readings. Feeling it was her obligation, she would spend hours correcting these student papers for punctuation, spelling, usage, and grammar. After returning one too many papers marked in purple and overhearing a child complain, “Oh no, my paper’s really bad . . . it’s all purple!” she realized her focus for graduate school: teaching writing!⁴

Isbell’s degree program required an action plan for teaching writing in her classroom; her goal was to implement a workshop environment using the 6+1 traits of writing.⁵ When time came to put the plan into action, the road was a little rocky, but it worked. Despite not having models to observe, Isbell embraced putting her plan to work because “she had nowhere to go, but up.” Two of the major scholars she studied were Graves and Murray—the old-timers on the workshop method. For putting the workshop into practice, she relied on Calkin’s *The Art of Teaching Writing*, Culham’s *6+1 Traits of Writing: The Complete Guide*, and Nagin’s *Because Writing Matters: Improving Student Writing in Our Schools*.

Setting the Stage

Each day in Ms. Iona's class children were given time to think, to write, to express anything at all that was happening in their heads and in their hearts. Each day they were given time away from memorizing facts and numbers, away from handwriting exercises and social studies tests, away from textbook reading and vocabulary lists. This special time was called "writing workshop". And just as Santa in his North Pole Workshop made special, magical gifts for children of the world, Ms. Iona made magic happen in the minds of her students and left them with gifts to last a lifetime.



Early in the school year I visited Isbell's class during *morning meeting* and at my son Jeffrey's request brought Charlie, our young, liver and white Springer-spaniel. Arriving in the classroom, I was surprised to find students sitting in a cozy circle around Isbell, who sat in her rocker, book in hand. The setting reminded me of kindergarten and first grade classrooms where teachers make an extra effort to provide a nurturing classroom environment. As Vicki Spandel notes in *The 9 Rights of Every Writer*, "Many of the conditions that nourish writing success are observable. They are things you can see, hear, and feel when you visit a classroom, the kinds of things that make a writer feel

immediately at home” (41). Every child indeed felt at home and participated in *morning meeting*, either to read the poem-of-the-day, read the riddle or joke-of-the-day, or respond to Isbell’s 20-questions-mystery. The children waited their turn to talk, but also intently listened as others spoke. Since Jeffrey had a special friend on this particular day, each child asked something about Charlie. The questions were serious, funny, interesting, and sincere. *Morning meeting*, while not a writing activity, helped develop trust and personal engagement, where every child knew early on their voice would be heard and their opinion valued. Isbell, the actress, was setting the stage for successful writing.

I left that day wondering why, as educators at any academic level, we presume more orderly and distant classroom environments are needed as children mature and as greater academic expectations are set. Todd DeStigter makes this observation in *Reflections of a Citizen Teacher: Literacy, Democracy, and the Forgotten Students of Addison High* when he follows Rosa, a second language learner through a semester of high school courses. Unfortunately, Rosa only experiences a trusting, personally engaging atmosphere in her ESL class, while her other classes fail to provide the sense of place that invites participation and response (101). The transition to a discussion-oriented, student-centered classroom is not an easy one to make. It feels so different from most traditional classrooms for both students and teachers, especially in a college classroom. Today I often question whether the relaxed and personal atmosphere I strive to create is justified. However, one business writing student this spring, initially skeptical of my nurturing teaching style, put my fear to rest: “in the middle of the semester ... I realized you really cared about my learning ... When I finally came to this realization, my composition course with you became much better ... once I left my ego at the door.” Seeing Isbell’s students allowed me to gain a greater level of trust and confidence in my own teaching practice.

Letting Go

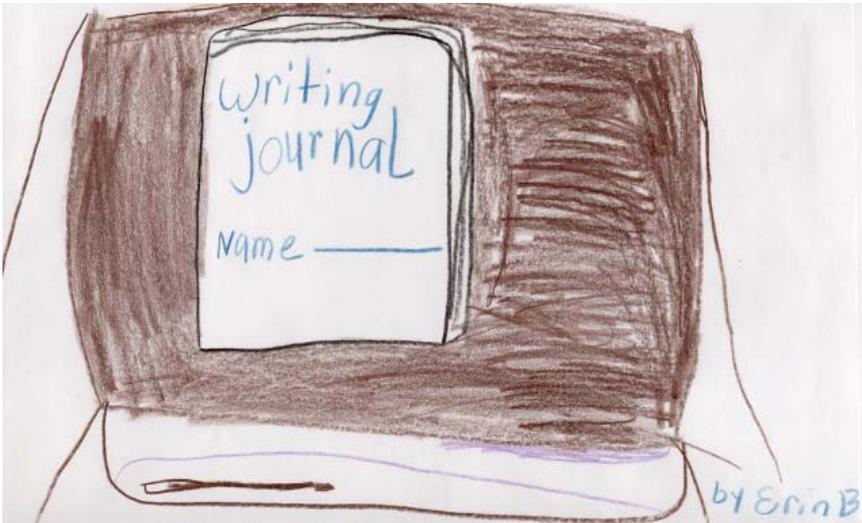
At the beginning of the school year, Ms. Iona gave each student their own composition journal to use during writing workshop. Writing in these heavy, thick writing notebooks made each child feel proud and important, especially as the year progressed and they could see many pages filled with their own words and ideas.

One part of writing workshop many of the children loved was their freedom to write about anything at all. Being already nine and ten-years-old and in school all day, they seldom had time to play make-believe anymore, a time they recall from their earlier childhood where anything was possible. Every day Ms. Iona encouraged the children to stretch their minds and imaginations to places and people and ideas they never knew existed. By way of writing, a child could become someone they always wanted to be, confront an animal, alien, or place they feared, or act out a story as it unfolded in their mind's eye. Each day during writing workshop these students worked hard as young writers. They started new writing projects, discussed their writing and ideas with one another, read their writing aloud to others, revised their writing, edited and typed their writing, and finally, made elaborate illustrations and covers for their published work.



Calkins says, “In the workshop children write about what is alive and vital and real for them—and other writers in the room listen and extend and guide, laugh and cry and marvel” (*The Art of Teaching Writing* 19). Isbell encouraged the children to generate ideas and decide for themselves what to write and how best to represent those ideas. One student wrote an on-going series of adventure stories about a cat with super powers; another wrote multiple non-fiction descriptions of dinosaurs; several students worked on chapter books. One boy couldn’t come up with anything to write about early in the year, struggling to get any words down in his writer’s notebook. Then Isbell found out he loved mechanics and farm machinery, especially his Grandpa’s plow. The next week she asked him to write about the machines. Delighted to write about something he loved so much, he went on to write and illustrate several pieces about farm machines.⁶

An incredible amount of writing took place in Isbell’s class—an hour a day, four days out of five, was dedicated to writing. By the year’s end, many children had filled two thick composition notebooks with original writing. Vicki Spandel emphasizes the positive correlation between how much writing students do and their ability to establish and take control of their own writing process (40). Ray discusses the need for students to develop a “stamina” for the time writing takes and to understand writing workshop as “time” to work as a writer, rather than a “task.” She explains, “while there is much variation in how writers engage in the different aspects of the writing process, the one non-negotiable seems to be time” (“Why Cauley Writes Well ...” 102).



Children were also encouraged to “personalize” their writing process, “because process at its best ... is different for every person” (Spandel 40). Ray emphasizes the importance of valuing “talk” as part of the writing process: “students talk before they write, while they’re writing, and after they write” (102). She contends that talk is support for writing and encourages children to talk about their interests and passions, as well as the writing itself (“Why Cauley Writes Well ...” 102). Individual differences were recognized and respected in Isbell’s writing workshop. While many of her students worked in groups and talked through much of their writing process, several worked quietly alone and chose not to share their writing in conference until they felt it was close to complete. Some students mastered one type of writing, perhaps poetry, and felt comfortable remaining in that genre, while others stuck with one or two topics throughout the year.

Isbell said ideally she would have writing workshop consist of a 15 minute mini-lesson⁷ with the remaining time devoted to writing and conferring. The mini-lesson might be an introduction to one of the 6 writing traits (idea generation, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions), or a lesson on some aspect of the writing process. Currently, Isbell does not have mini-lessons consistently scheduled, but incorporates them when appropriate. I recall getting in on the tail end

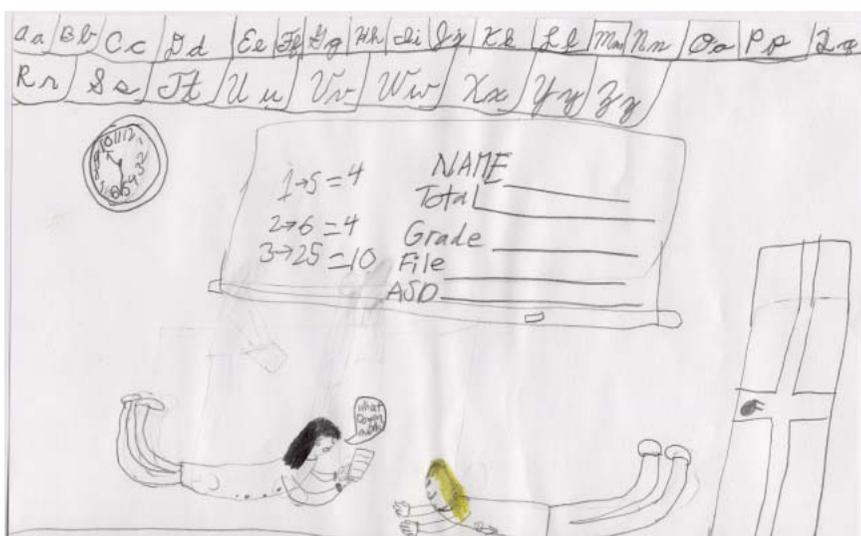
of one mini-lesson for creating effective leads. She had the children listen—really listen—to how Kate DiCamillo opens her story *The Tale of Despereaux*. Isbell asks the class why this is a good lead, and the children have good answers: “it makes you want to find out what happens next” and “it puts you right into the story.” That day during workshop Isbell had students revise to improve the lead in one of their writing pieces.

“Reading their World”⁸

Ms. Iona’s writing workshop gave students time and freedom to pretend they were in a magical land of make-believe once again or to reflect on their own lives. They could pretend to be princesses and fairies, kings and knights, adventurers and world travelers. Ms. Iona had the children think about using words as tools, such as when they had to write descriptive pieces. Sometimes writing was hard work and required a lot of thought. The students had to learn to put their words to work in describing a picture or place or feeling they wanted their reader to experience. Throughout the year, they wrote accounts of family vacations, stories of aliens and superheroes, skits of summer camp, poems of the season, and lively, imaginative tales.

One part of Ms. Iona’s writing workshop the children really liked was the conference. This was a time when each writer was able to share an idea or a piece of writing with a listener. The listener could be another classmate, Ms. Iona, a student teacher, a parent, or a helper visiting the class. When a child read their writing aloud and listened to how powerful their own voice could be, they could hardly wait to revise or publish their work, or sometimes to start something new. When they read, they watched eagerly for the reaction of their listener. Then they listened carefully to what the listener had to say. Through Ms. Iona’s modeling, the children learned to respond to each other in questions, compliments, and suggestions. Everyday the students looked forward to this time and grew enthused and excited about their own writing and the writing of their friends and classmates.

Attending Isbell’s writing workshop for the first time, and uncertain about what she was looking for from her listeners,



I was delighted to find *response*—compliments, questions, comments, and suggestions—her primary concern. Students were encouraged to come to conference with questions and new ideas for their listeners. After a few weeks in the classroom, my mom soon joined me every Tuesday morning. At first apprehensive, she looked for errors, pointing out misspelled words or where punctuation was needed, but soon fell into the rhythm of listening and enjoying the unique narratives, stories, and poems the children shared. As I asked the children questions about their own lives, she too asked questions and shared personal life stories. Before long, we both knew many personal details of each child’s life: whose parents were divorced, what pets they had, how many siblings they had, what they liked to eat, and their favorite color—what Donald Graves describes as allowing children to teach us about themselves, their world, and their needs (*A Fresh Look at Writing*).

DeStigter contends these kinds of personal connections allow students to feel their growth and learning are valued and important to their classroom and school, “a space of understanding and empathy where the teacher listened carefully and offered words of encouragement, a space where students shared their lives” (97). According to Dewey, these are fundamental

building blocks of democracy, where learners are recognized and valued as individuals (*Experience and Education* 33). Getting to know each student on an individual level is a challenge in my college classroom. We meet only 50 minutes three times a week for a semester. I try to learn one or two details about each student over the first few weeks of class and have students work in small groups, sitting in on different groups each day. By the end of the semester, I really do know each student well, and they notice: “Your attention to detail and concern for everyone on an individual level are what helped.” But more importantly, my students get to know one another and are comfortable sharing their work: “One of the best things about this class is that we got to workshop with our classmates and see what they had written, or even ask for some help. I really enjoyed being able to learn from each other because we all have something different to offer.” In a successful workshop environment, as in a working democracy, participants learn from one another and show genuine interest in and concern for each others’ lives.

Perhaps the greatest concern for teachers trying to create a workshop atmosphere is how to make time to confer with and respond to all students and their writing. For this particular school year (2004-05), Isbell admits she was lucky to have plenty of parental support and volunteers to help with conferences. But how can a teacher run a writing workshop alone and still be able to confer with individual students? Shelton and Fu explain conferring needn’t be planned or formal. In fact, a student conference might only take a minute or two and happen very spontaneously. It may be as short and simple as a student asking a question or sharing an idea as a teacher passes by their work area during workshop time (123). In addition, students learn to confer with one another, often getting excellent response and suggestions from their peers. Isbell offers the following commentary in regards to her class of first graders (2006-07 school year):

One of my favorite things to do during Writing Workshop is to walk around the room and listen to students as they confer with each other. We discuss what “conferencing” is and I model it for them, but to

see them empowered to lead it themselves is inspiring. As I walk around the room, I hear writers asking questions of their listeners, the listeners offering compliments and asking questions of the writers. And they are using a writer's vocabulary the entire time. Those moments are so rewarding ... because they are then "teaching" each other to become better writers—everyone gets to be an "expert".

Ray describes what Isbell has done as empowering students as members of "a responsive, literate community" (105). Such response and support is at the heart of a *working* workshop environment, where writers make choices and teach themselves and one another by reading, writing, thinking, and listening to what others have to say. As one of my college business writing students reflects: "Perhaps one of the most beneficial features of this class was the regularly scheduled peer workshops ... the feedback I received from peer workshops was oftentimes very valuable. The workshops made me realize how valuable my peers could be, not only in school, but also in a work-place environment." Another student attests to his peers:

Today I would like to thank you for being such a big help with my papers. As you may have noticed my paper writing abilities are not as strong as I would like them to be. With your help I am learning to write a more smooth and readable paper. I have learned that I use a lot of words that are unneeded and places to put a comma instead of a period. As far back as I can remember my writing skills have been very weak, and before this class I never revised my papers ... I thank you very much for helping me become a better writer.

As time passed, Isbell's students became increasingly comfortable with the workshop and in sharing their writing with listeners. Excitement and anticipation often showed in their faces as I walked in the room each Tuesday afternoon for writer's workshop. Most delightful and surprising was how cooperatively and independently children worked. They really talked and listened to one another. Several girls worked in small groups and moved from one area to another, while boys often worked in

pairs or independently. The classroom was set up for students to move about freely—publishing materials were kept in a cabinet on one side of the classroom, computers were on the other side, conference tables were in the back of the room, while children worked collaboratively or independently at their desks and on the floor. I can remember only one or two times throughout the year when Isbell had to remind students to use their time for the writing process. Overall, children were engaged in their work.

Isbell also encouraged cooperative writing, and many children took time during the school year to compose pieces with classmates and friends. I recall one example in particular where two girls wrote an on-going play about summer camp. During *Author's Sharing Day* they acted it out, props and all. They continued writing new acts throughout the year, providing us different episodes of antics and lessons in their imaginary summer camp. Helen Dale discusses how collaboration “allows for the face-to-face planning and revising that encourages the talk about writing so vital in learning to be a writer.” Not only do students learn about writing, but also “become better problem solvers, and develop a tolerance for others’ opinions and learning styles” (Dale 55).

This ability and willingness of teachers to decentralize classrooms, encouraging autonomy and active participation, has long been noted as a primary way to foster participatory democracy. Brookfield and Preskill emphasize that without the opportunity to practice autonomy “democracy is diminished, and the opportunities for growth and self-development . . . are greatly weakened” (17). A friend and fellow parent had this to say of Isbell’s student-centered classroom: “When Isbell took the risk in giving up control in her class, she also gave students permission and occasion to practice autonomy.” The practice of independent thought needs to happen over many years of student learning. While some of my college students embrace critical examination and discussion in writing workshop, others never gain this independence and authority over their writing. As one student complained: “Group workshops were not as beneficial as they could have been. Possibly a very brief, easy to complete worksheet would be helpful.” However, learning to think

critically and reflectively, and negotiating difficult choices in presenting one's ideas is the methodical training a literate and thoughtful democracy needs. On the contrary, such a *brief, easy-to-complete worksheet* that my college students often expect encourages passivity, the downfall of a working democratic state.

Valuing Their Work

The children cherished the time in their writing process to publish their work. Ms. Iona encouraged them to make beautiful covers for each piece and to take pride in their finished work. She had plenty of brightly colored paper and a whole store of decorative items the children could choose from to complement their covers. There were shiny sequins, buttons of all shapes, colors, and sizes, colorful markers, and a variety of other decorations. The covers often revealed both the subject of the writing and a little something about the author.

Ms. Iona's writing workshop was a time not only to write and read, but to practice listening. For at this period in history, the world was in tumultuous times. There were wars, and many people in the world, especially in our own country, felt threatened by the ideas of others. During this time, the art of listening and the incredible gifts it can bring to humanity were not well known. Luckily, Ms. Iona had studied the little known, ancient texts of a peaceful people who lived in this land long ago. She learned from these writings that when children are taught at a young age to listen with concern, interest, and respect to what others express from their hearts and minds, a magical creation transpires: children come to appreciate how other people think, live, and dream. She had come to believe that when children learn to listen well, they also learn to value and respect other people's opinions and ways of life.



The most prized part of writing workshop for Ms. Iona's class was Author's Sharing Day, a time set aside each month when Ms. Iona turned the classroom into a small, comfortable stage. Parents, grandparents, friends, and others in the community were invited to listen to the stories and hear the voices of these proud, young writers. Each student had a chance to read aloud their published piece in front of a real audience. It was a special time where children learned confidence for themselves as writers and thinkers, and appreciation for their classmates and families as listeners.

The approach Isbell uses in assessing student writing speaks both to "evaluation" as the "act of finding value in a piece of writing" (Hansen 188-189) and to the 6+1 Traits assessment for teaching writing. Isbell confirms the "value" in every piece of student writing through positive encouragement and peer and teacher feedback during conference. She spends 6-week periods on each of the six traits during which time students write a number of different pieces. After six weeks, students choose one finished piece of writing to be terminally assessed on that particular trait. For each trait, students use a rubric to assess their writing during different stages of the writing process. During the six weeks, they revise and re-assess how each piece meets the writ-

ing trait criteria. When students are satisfied with their own development, they get more feedback, then edit and publish. Isbell defers terminal assessment until students are satisfied with their own assessment, and then uses the same rubric to assess the chosen work (Murray *A Writer Teaches Writing* 139). At this point, both Isbell and the student have familiarized themselves with the writing piece and rubric through conference, revision, and mini-lessons, so terminal assessment requires little time. One problem Isbell experienced with this process was having students choose the best illustration of the particular trait. Instead, students sometimes submit the piece they liked best or one they were spending a lot of time on. In the future, Isbell hopes to better assist students in selecting appropriate texts.

At the end of each six week period, writers celebrate their finished work through presentations at *Author's Sharing Day*. DeStigter emphasizes the necessity for teachers to provide educational experiences that collectively prepare students for “democratizing action” later in life. Such experiences must transcend the classroom and “live fruitfully and creatively” in later life experience (99). Dewey writes, “A primary responsibility of educators is that they ... recognize in the concrete what surroundings are conducive to experiences that lead to growth” (qtd. in DeStigter 100). *Author's Sharing Day* exemplifies settings and individual experiences which lead to growth in lifelong language development by putting students at the forefront in discussing, presenting, and making choices about their language skills. These remarkable days provide students the opportunity to share their writing with a real audience of family members and peers who pack the classroom. Isbell never limited what kids read or how long each presentation took. As the year progressed, confidence radiated from their proud faces as they shared their finished work and listened to their classmates' voices. Isbell says, “I see a lot of growth in some students especially ... mostly, I see growth in their confidence. Through all the writing and sharing and publishing we do, they really gain a sense of pride and accomplishment, especially during *Author's Sharing Day*.”⁹

Another way student work is both valued and assessed

in writing workshop is through the use of student portfolios. Jane Hansen promotes retaining student writing portfolios from year-to-year to demonstrate student growth in language learning. Teachers can also retain student work throughout the year and demonstrate growth in particular areas. Reflective writing can be a valuable tool in getting students to recognize ways their writing and thinking skills have improved over time. I use this type of exercise in my college classroom, asking students at the end of the semester to reflect on their portfolio contents, writing process, and growth as writers. Such reflective practice provides writers a window to lifelong growth and critical self-examination of their learning and writing process.

Reclaiming their Gift

By the end of the year, each student had a wonderful portfolio of published writing pieces and many more unfinished drafts in their composition notebooks. But even during the last days of school, Ms. Iona had her students look back at their writing to think about and plan what they might work on over the summer.

As the school year ended, Ms. Iona's students learned they would have to move onward, to another school¹⁰ and away from Ms. Iona's writing workshop. They would miss their days of writing and the excitement of not knowing what new story or idea might come, "bubbling up to their brain and onto the page" (Cadence). They would miss the hard work of finding just the right words for their pieces, of revising, editing, and publishing their writing. They would miss the glory and joy of designing and decorating and finishing their beautiful book covers. And they would miss listening to their own voice and to the words written by their friends and classmates.

learn to create spaces in which everyone's efforts are recognized ... they learn to value silence and reflective speculation" (33). The development of these individual habits and skills is crucial to an open, educated, and working democracy.

For teachers, seeing our students become writers in their own right is perhaps the most rewarding part of integrating a workshop-centered classroom. "Teaching writing is a matter of faith. We demonstrate that faith when we listen well, when we refer to our students as writers, when we expect them to love writing and to pour heart and soul into it ... when children receive this kind of listening attention, when their stories and information and ideas and lives are heard and celebrated and channeled onto the page in this way, they respond ... 'Listen to what I've got' and 'Will you hear my story?'" (Calkins *The Art of Teaching Writing* 17).

My last visit to Isbell's writing workshop exemplifies her commitment to immersing students in the language and craft of writing. On this day, Isbell had students take out their writer's notebooks and record from memory the steps in the writing process. She asked that they not spend too much time, but quickly record what they knew. Every student eagerly dug into writing, as they all had something to say as writers. Afterwards, they shared responses and clarified the purpose each step served.

Isbell reflected recently how amazing it is to walk through the classroom and *listen* to her kids *talk* like writers. Upon reflection, Isbell sees her writing classroom today as a fun and productive environment, where students are not only motivated, but really like writing and understand the practice of the craft. Nancy Shelton shares similar sentiments from her class of 4th grade students after a memorable first year of workshoping together. Neither she nor her students wanted their writing and sharing to end. She says her students "had never felt so attached emotionally with their schoolwork, with themselves, and with each other in this learning community" (127). Writing workshop fostered in her students both a love for writing and an understanding of how to be a writer (127).

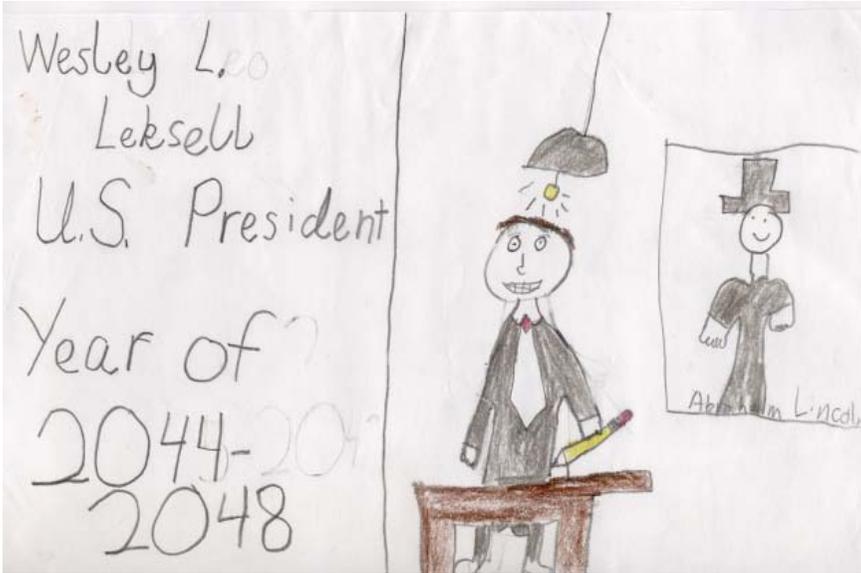
Reading their World, Again

Fortunately, Ms. Iona's students never forgot their treasured days of writing workshop. They kept writing and listening as part of their everyday lives. But most remarkably, they grew up and grew into people who changed their world. They grew into people who listened, really listened, to their own voice and to the voices of others. They spread the word and practice of Ms. Iona's writing workshop, and soon people of all ages and walks of life were finally learning to listen. And as they listened and thought carefully about each other's ideas, they came to respect one another.



The children of Ms. Iona's class grew up to be not only good listeners, but great leaders. They became ambassadors to other countries because they listened. They became legislators of their cold, sturdy, and ingenious state and built schools where new ideas were encouraged. They became congressmen and women, and senators for their great country, which was now at peace and becoming known worldwide as the land of listening, where everyone's ideas are heard, listened to, and respected. They became the finest teachers in the land. They wrote books on writing and books on listening, and always—always— read their work aloud to one another. And as these children became

parents, they knew to listen to even the tiniest members of their family and society. Soon, the troubled land they were born into came to resemble instead the ancient, peaceful culture Ms. Iona had studied, where learning to listen was just as important as learning to read and write.



Isbell believes writing workshop can be used to teach writing to people of any age or ability.¹¹ Her single, most important piece of advice to others is to realize: “writing is a social event.”¹² The same conclusion was reached by a veteran teacher who worked to change her approach to teaching writing: “we have gained a deeper understanding that social practices really matter in learning to write” (Bintz and Dillard 118). While Isbell used to think of writing as taking place in silence, preferably far removed from others, she now believes just the opposite: a social, active, classroom environment will foster a love for not just writing, but the writing process as well.

Isbell also realizes she has not found Utopia in her current methods. She hopes to further research using self-assessment effectively, along with portfolios to demonstrate long-term growth of student writers. She worries some about how her pedagogy and student writing are perceived by parents and admin-

istrators.¹³ But she is sure of one thing ... kids are writing and she is learning. As Nancie Atwell reflects, “Teaching writing as a process gave me permission to view teaching as a process, too ... I gained the courage to change my mind and my life and the humility to revise my practice” (16).¹⁴ Isbell, too, has realized her own need for growth and resilience to orthodoxy in her writing classroom as she prepares to workshop this fall.

Lucy Calkins asserts, “giving voice to young writers and letting youngsters claim their authority ... must also mean that children learn that their words can make a difference in the world” (*Living Between the Lines* 113). *Ms. Iona’s Gift* is a vision for children changing their world by listening to their own voice and the voices of others, and in doing so learning confidence, respect, and humility, foundations Dewey dreamed our educational system might someday embody. World peace might be possible if we continue to *read the world* of our own classroom practice, of teachers around us, and of our students, whose lives we touch everyday and who are our own first teachers. Perhaps one day I’ll have students entering my college classroom as *writers*, young adults who value their own voice and the writing and ideas of peers, who know the hard work it takes to develop and hone the craft of writing and who come to college ready to listen and expecting to be heard.



Notes

1. *Because Writing Matters* brings together 30 years of the National Writing Project (NWP) initiative to develop and support on-going professional development in teaching writing. Its mission, in part, is to de-silence the “silent R” by helping teachers develop new strategies to teach writing effectively. Over 175 projects nationwide have been developed in local areas, bringing together university faculty, K-12 teachers, and grassroots writing groups to enhance and support each other’s pursuits to bring writing literacy to the forefront in their communities. NWP uses a teachers-teaching-teachers model to integrate best writing practices into classrooms in all disciplines. The success of such programs has been widely demonstrated to improve student achievement in writing. According to Nagin’s book, the program serves more than 100,000 teachers annually. This text brings together the best classroom strategies that have come out of the program and demonstrates both the need for and success in bringing improved writing pedagogy to K-12 classrooms.

2. Process theory was introduced during the late 1960’s by theorists and practitioners alike. Donald Murray, Peter Elbow, George Hillocks, Mike Rose, and Ross Winterowd all published discourse on how to integrate process theory into college English and Composition classrooms. Donald Murray’s 1972 essay puts teaching writing as process in perspective: “To be a teacher of process ... takes qualities too few of us have, but which most of us can develop. We have to be quiet, to listen, to respond ... We must respect our student for his potential truth and for his potential voice. We are coaches, encouragers, developers, creators of environments in which students can experience the writing process for themselves” (*Learning by Teaching* 16).

In 1983 Donald Graves, Murray’s student, published *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work*, introducing process theory into K-12 classroom environments. This text and subsequent publications by Graves and others provide K-12 educators tools and inspiration to integrate new practice into teaching writing. In a recent NTCE *Language Arts* special on writing

workshop, Graves reflects on what he has learned from teachers of writing over the past 30 years. He says the fundamentals to process pedagogy are that children need to select their own topic, but sometimes with guidance and encouragement; they need frequent response to their writing from teachers and other readers; they need to write often, ideally, an hour/day 3-4 days out of 5; they need to publish their writing in some form or another; they need to see others', especially their teachers', writing and thinking processes; and finally, they need to retain collections of work ... their writing histories. Graves says more recent developments show a critical need for teachers to write in order to experience and share the process with their students; the need to recognize and enrich the link between reading and writing; the effectiveness of mini-lessons; the importance of teacher literacy; and finally, that writing belongs in every subject and in every field (89-90).

3. Donald Graves argues for the imperative of teachers to model and participate in writing activities with students: "Writing with and for students is one of the best uses of instructional time there is, even when time is in short supply" (*What I've Learned from Teachers of Writing* 89).

4. As both a linguist and writing teacher, Constance Weaver has researched teaching grammar extensively. Her *Teaching Grammar in Context* confirms what Isbell found to be true: rote lessons in grammar do little to improve student writing. Instead, teaching grammar in the context of student work proves to be much more effective. When students have the opportunity to "see" the correct and incorrect use of language in their own work and can practice these constructs, their retention is much greater.

5. Ruth Culham's *6+1 Traits: The Complete Guide* presents a series of traits that characterize good writing: ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions, and presentation. The idea is to allow young writers to identify how their writing may be revised. If a writer can focus on a single trait and assess how well their writing piece fulfills that trait's characteristics, they can talk about and determine strategies for revision. The advantage of incorporating the 6+1 traits allows

teachers and students a vocabulary to discuss writing, a way to define what good writing looks like, and a way for students to evaluate their own writing. The intent is for students to gain control and confidence in their writing process. For Isbell, incorporating these traits was a given, as they are required curriculum for Duluth Public School teachers. Isbell says meshing the traits into the workshop environment was a rich and practical fit. Culham would agree: “The traits taught within an active, positive, process-oriented curriculum is an unbeatable combination” (9).

6. Katie Wood Ray emphasizes how children often write on one topic over and over again. Such immersion illustrates a child’s passion in a topic and is a great way for them to think about, read, learn, and explore a topic in-depth. She reminds teachers that writers must “care deeply” about what they write before we can expect them to “care deeply” about how they write (“Why Cauley Writes Well ...” 101). For additional direction and discussion on setting up a successful workshop, see Ray’s *The Writing Workshop: Working Through the Hard Parts (and They’re All Hard Parts)*.

7. Lucy McCormick Calkins came up with “mini-lessons” as a way to integrate direct instruction into the workshop environment. Teachers incorporate mini-lessons based on what they feel their students need. Teachers might read aloud good examples of narrative, model how to come up with interesting details, or give a brief lesson in capitalization.

8. Donald Graves developed the idea of “reading the world” as a primary way for students to explore topics of interest and ideas for writing. He later recast the phrase to “reading their world”, where teachers learn personal details about their students’ lives and interests, a crucial step to developing responsive relationships with students and their writing.

9. In the 2006-07 school year, Isbell started a “casual Author’s Sharing Day”. She says: “I did this a lot with the first graders this past year, when I felt they were ready. The class sits on the rug and any writer who wishes to can share a piece of their work. They then call on three different people, each of whom tells the writer something positive--something specific (prefer-

ably using writer's language) that they liked about their text. Then, if anyone has a question or a constructive thought, they can share those as well. This is also a very rewarding experience and a chance for writers to hear directly from their peers."

10. After the 2004-2005 school year, Duluth's Chester Park Lab School closed for good. For over 75 years the school led the state in piloting and integrating innovative educational practices in collaboration with University of Minnesota Duluth students, educators, and researchers.

11. For detailed, practical advice on integrating a writing workshop in the primary grades, see Lucy Calkin's *The Art of Teaching Writing* and her *FIRSTHAND* series. Calkins asserts children learn literacy skills first through oral presentation of their pictures and stories. These presentations are excellent ways to foster oral and pictorial literacy which immerse developmentally prior to and in conjunction with written literacy forms. The 2003 handbook series includes *The Nuts & Bolts of Teaching Writing*; *The Conferring Handbook*; *Launching the Writer's Workshop*; *Small Moments: Personal Narrative Writing*; *Writing for Readers: Teaching Skills and Strategies*; *The Craft of Revision*; *Authors as Mentors*; *Non-Fiction Writing: Procedures and Reports*; *Poetry: Powerful Thoughts in Tiny Packages*. Each text takes a reader into the workshop environment and offers commentary, examples of student work, mini-lessons, and assessment rubrics.

12. Graves, Murray, Calkins, Atwell, Dale, Hillocks, Elbow, Rose, Winterowd, among others, concur with Isbell's advice: social environments are key to successful language arts development.

13. NTCE's *Language Arts* is full of excellent documentaries of K-6 teacher success in using and defending a writing workshop curriculum and pedagogy. For an excellent account of successfully integrating writing workshop into a high-risk student population with strict district test score expectations, see Shelton & Fu's "Creating Space for Teaching Writing and Test Preparation." Shelton says while she was pleased at achieving test score expectations, most important was "her students' love for writing and learning, and the understanding of the process

a writer has to go through to produce quality writing ... what pleased her was the joyful and thoughtful community her students had created” (127).

14. Atwell's *In the Middle: New Understandings about Writing Reading and Learning* is a primary resource for teachers in the 5-9 grade level wishing to incorporate a process oriented, workshop approach to teaching writing. Atwell says this is the age we tend to lose students from seeing themselves as writers as we put more formal and structural expectations on their writing assignments. Linda Miller Cleary's *From the Other Side of the Desk* affirms Atwell's assessment. Miller Cleary's research demonstrates the need for students to develop a strong writing identity in adolescent years by way of writing history interviews with individual 11th grade students. Her work shows it is most often the middle school years when students tend to stop enjoying the process of writing, and, more importantly, provides "ways to help students find voice and reestablish intrinsic motivation for writing" (jacket).

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