
Reading Like Writers

When teachers immerse students in reading and studying the kind of writing they want them to do, they are actually teaching at two levels. They teach students about the particular genre or writing issue that is the focus of the study, but they also teach students to use a habit of mind experienced writers use all the time. They teach them how to *read like writers* (Ray 1999; Smith 1988), noticing as an insider how things are written. Students learn to look at texts the way a mechanic looks at cars or a musician listens to music, to use the particular knowledge system of a writer (Harste 1992). Over time they learn to notice things about writing that other people (who don't write) don't notice, and all along the way this noticing helps them develop a vision for the writing they will do. If Emily and Lisa had done all the noticing for their students, pointing out the features they wanted them to see in the gathered texts, their students would have had no reason to learn to notice text features themselves. This is particularly critical to genre study.

When I think about an inquiry stance, I always feel like this reason alone—*inquiry teaches students to read like writers*—is reason enough to teach from this stance as often as possible. Why? Because so many professional writers give the same advice when asked what a person should do to become a writer: *you have to read*, they say. It is discipline-based inquiry (Berghoff, Borgmann, and Parr 2003) that puts reading at the forefront of the teaching and lets students develop a knowledge base about good writing in the same way professional writers develop theirs.

Grounded Teaching

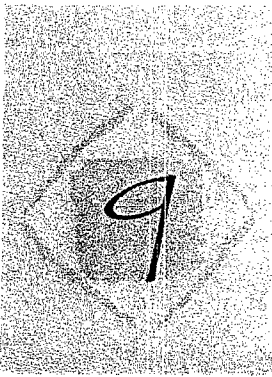
When the first move in teaching is to gather real-world texts, this move provides some insurance that the teaching will be grounded and, for lack of a better word, *true*. Inevitably, when teachers teach writing without any real-world writing attached to it, they end up teaching things that just aren't true, or at least they aren't true all the time. Edgar Schuster (2004) calls these things "mythrules." Anyone who has moved from a lesson-delivery stance to an inquiry stance has stories to tell about having to reconsider the content of his or her teaching.

With an inquiry stance, teachers let the writing itself shape and define what the content will be, and they are willing to accept the gray area that comes with that. "Inquiry does not narrow our perspective; it gives us more understandings, questions, and possibilities than when we started" (Short, Schroeder, Laird, Kauffman, Ferguson, and Crawford 1996, 8). There isn't just one way to write commentary, and there aren't just a few simple things to know about this kind of writing. By nature the content is expansive, nuanced, and full of alternatives. And if teachers try to change it into something simpler because the students are, after all, just ten- and eleven-year-olds doing this kind of writing for the first time, they end up teaching something that just doesn't ring true.

I understand that when teaching is simplified, when children are given a graphic organizer and a few simple guidelines to follow, they sometimes produce tighter, more polished-looking products than the writing I typically see students write out of inquiry. But when this happens, the very nature of what is being taught has fundamentally changed because writing doesn't exist like that in the world outside school. Edgar Schuster says he's been looking for a five-paragraphed theme in published materials since he started teaching in 1958 and has yet to find *a single one* (2004).

Related to this, if teachers eliminate the gray areas and give students a simple way to write something, not only is the teaching not true to the product, it isn't true to the process either. Outside of school, when faced with tasks that require composition, writers have to figure out how to write things. No one gives them a graphic organizer, and the struggle to organize and make everything work together is there anew every time they set out to write. This struggle is an essential part of the writing process, and if it's taken away, students develop a very false sense of how real writing gets done. In other words, what begins as an instructional decision, to have students use graphic organizers, becomes a curricular problem. Students learn something about process that just isn't true.

In an inquiry stance, teachers help children explore different alternatives for how to write something, and then they let them do what writers really have to do and make decisions about how their pieces will go. Does this make it harder on students? Perhaps. But when teachers simply ask them to do it as well as they can and understand it will take lots of experience for them to get really good at it, it makes it achievable. Then, while students are getting that experience, what they are learning is grounded in the realities of real-world writing, both product and process.



Reading Immersion and Close Study

Once students have access to texts and know what they're studying, it's time to start reading, widely and deeply. When I think about reading immersion, I always think about hearing Ted Kooser, our National Poet Laureate, give this advice to aspiring writers, "Before you write one poem, you need to read at least 100." But when should those poems be read? If writing workshop is a place where students are supposed to do the work of writers, and if it's the work of writers to read, then it makes sense to me that this reading belongs in writing workshop. In other words, I don't think you are taking time away from students' writing when you have them do this kind of reading. Certainly, across a school year you want to keep in mind the balance of how students spend their time doing a writer's work, but I believe it's okay if some of that time belongs to reading. Look at the balance of time Ted Kooser is suggesting: 100 poems read for every one written.

The discomfort with this—students reading during writing workshop—is what has caused some teachers, I think, to try and figure out how to get the reading done at other times of the day. I don't think it's a good idea to ask students to use their independent reading time (during reading workshop) to do the immersion work for a study in writing. Most of the time, students haven't self-selected the texts they need to read for the study in writing; these texts have been assigned. Independent reading should be a time for students to follow their own intentions as readers. Certainly, in a perfect teaching world it would be wonderful if the texts you use to study writing could be texts students knew first for other reasons—in content area studies or from an earlier study of writing, for example. But that requires an enormous amount of long-range planning about how to piece together an entire year of studies in all content areas. If you can pull this off, go for it. But if not, I believe it's okay to use the writing workshop as the place of first encounter for texts. Remember, reading the kind of thing you're planning to write is part of a writer's work.

What About Teacher Modeling?

The importance of students seeing their teachers as writers and of teacher modeling is well documented in the professional literature about the teaching of writing (Atwell 1998; Graves 1989; Ray 2002; Routman 2005). The modeling a teacher does, however, looks different depending on which teaching stance is taken. Sometimes when teachers write they are trying to create a *model* more in the noun sense of the word than in the verb sense. They want their writing to serve as a model for what the students will write. But when teachers work from an inquiry stance, they have decided that the *model* for the writing will come from the stack of gathered texts. And of course it's not just one model—there's a stack of texts there—which is why the word *vision* is probably a better word for what they want their students to have.

When quality texts anchor the teaching, students don't need their teachers to create a model of what the writing should look like, but this doesn't mean that modeling isn't important.

Related to this, teachers who consistently model the process of writing develop empathy for the work of a writer, and I don't think the value of this should be underestimated. Teachers who have empathy for the work of a writer are able to teach more than just process; they can help students understand what it's like to be a writer engaged in the process, and that's so different. For example, it's one thing to know, in an intellectual sort of way, that people who write often have to rewrite and rework a draft over and over to get it right. It's quite another thing to understand, in an emotional sort of way, how hard it is to actually do that. When what you know about "people who write" becomes what you know "as a person who writes," what you know *changes*.
