

NELIP Writing Workshop and Conferencing Strategies

“Just wanted to update you on my progress in teaching writing. You said that if I teach it, they will learn. I have been very explicit about the strategies and today I had a student write a paper that met all my criteria. So thank you so much for the class and advice. I am feeling much better about my teaching of writing.”

- Austin School Principal/Teacher, February 2016 (email)

The teacher quoted above participated in an interactive class offered by the coordinator assigned to early literacy. Nevada Early Literacy Intervention Program (NELIP) is designed to meet the literacy needs of all elementary teachers in the Northeastern Region. The interactive class is offered in all six counties in an effort to fulfill the assignment of reaching elementary teachers. The class focus is always in either reading, word study, or writing. The last two years have focused on writing due to the increased interest in writing instruction brought about by Nevada Academic Content Standards (NVACS).

What impact can an interactive writing strategies class have on teachers and students? It can give teachers specific strategies to empower their students, it can build teacher confidence in writing instruction which then carries over into confident student writers, it can forever change the way writing is taught.

Preparation, Materials and Participants

The coordinator had observed that teachers across the region were attempting to implement writer’s workshop in their classrooms with varying degrees of success and many were running into similar difficulties. Also, conferencing with student writers was a common concern. Thus, the coordinator searched for texts that would offer strategies to address the difficulties of writer’s workshop and the challenges of conferring with student writers.

In this region there are many teachers who are isolated geographically, but others feel isolated in their teaching of writing. One of the goals of the class this year was to partner each teacher with another teacher in a grade alike situation so that they could confer about successes, challenges, and next steps. Technology was embedded in the class to partner teachers across the area.

The first text chosen was *The Unstoppable Writing Teacher: Real Strategies for the Real Classroom* by M. Colleen Cruz. This book was selected because it tackles the common concerns, struggles, and roadblocks that all writing teachers face, and helps teachers engage in problem solving those challenges. “We can’t solve all the problems we’re faced with in writing instruction, but we can choose how to respond to them. And our responses will make all the difference” (Cruz, 2015, p. 8). To address individual needs, the coordinator asked each teacher to name their biggest ‘monster’ (it is often ‘time’) and then work with reflection, reading, and partner talk to make an action plan. Then, of course, to follow through with the action plan and reflect again and plan again each class meeting.

The second text, to address conferencing concerns, was *Let’s Talk, One-on-One: Peer and Small-Group Writing Conferences* by Mark Overmeyer. Throughout this book, Mark describes how classroom talk benefits students in a variety of ways, from discovering their interests and

backgrounds as writers to helping them develop the language to reflect on their writing progress. This book is packed with real classroom examples and stories to help educators make conferences more manageable and meaningful.

Thirty teachers registered for the class; twenty-one finished the class and received graduate level credit. Eleven teachers were from Humboldt County, eight from Elko County, one from Lander County, and one from Pershing County.

Interactive Classes and Requirements

Class requirements included the following:

- fifteen hours of seat time, during which teachers engaged in discussions around the required reading for each class;
- a classroom observation by the instructor during which the teacher taught a writing mini-lesson, after which the teacher and the coordinator reflected on the lesson;
- a partnership with another teacher using a shared Google Doc (shared between the teachers and the coordinator). In this Google Doc they engaged in a discussion about writing instruction challenges, successes, and next steps. They offered each other advice and support, encouragement, and celebrated success;
- a final reflective paper.

The class met six times during the months of September 2015 to November 2015. Each class was 2.5 hours and always began with a writing reflection which was focused on an individual challenge they identified as something they wanted to work on during this class. Next, a discussion of the required reading was done in small, site-based groups, using a protocol to give equal voice to all. It is sometimes challenging in an interactive situation to include the 'singletons' (we had a single teacher in Austin and one in Lovelock), but they were included with the Elko group during discussion time. Insights and big ideas from the text were then shared out with the whole group by taking turns between sites. Three classes were devoted to each text. Each class ended with a partner time, during which each pair connected via phone and/or Google Doc. Goals were set and reported on.

Classroom Observations

The classroom observation serves multiple purposes: it allows the instructor to build rapport with the teacher by getting a first-hand look at their teaching situation, it makes the teacher accountable for implementing the class content (in this case, writing workshop and/or conferencing), and it offers the opportunity for the instructor to offer face-to-face feedback to each teacher. Visits to multi-grade classrooms, observations of teachers instructing in writing, and eager writers tackling the challenge with enthusiasm make the observations the coordinator's favorite part of the class—even with long drives to outlying corners of the region.

It is rewarding to the coordinator to see teachers trying to implement strategies that they have learned about in class. And often, the feedback portion is a real ah-ha to the teacher. They want to learn, that is why they are taking the class, and so they welcome feedback and reflection. It is sad, but true, that teachers do wonderful things in their classroom that are rarely seen and appreciated by another teacher. If the coordinator can shine some light on the good things they are doing, it is a win-win and gladly received.

Technology

The coordinator wanted to implement technology as part of the class to meet 21st Century literacy advances and to offer teachers the opportunity to participate in an activity that they may want to try with their own students.

The technology implemented was mainly through Google Docs. Two different Google Docs were created and used during the class. For the first one, teachers were paired up with a teacher from another county or area that was in a similar grade level. They created a Google Doc that was also shared with the coordinator. The responsibility was given each class for them to correspond via the Doc to reflect on their successes, challenges, and next steps and to set goals. They were to offer advice to their partner, share resources, pictures, stories, just about anything that they thought might help. The coordinator went into each Doc after each class and responded to the pair, answering questions, and giving advice and thoughts.

Many of the partnerships were magical; great growth and sharing were done. Several struggled with Internet connections (outlying areas often have limited connection) and two didn't find the Doc to be helpful. Overall, it was useful for the coordinator to get the ongoing sense of what the challenges were and be able to respond immediately to any questions or misconceptions. The coordinator would do this again, counting it as a success.

A second Google Doc was one shared by all. The coordinator created it, shared it, and invited teachers to put big ideas on it so that others could see their thinking. This was little used, except for a couple of teachers, until the coordinator decided to make this a part of the required discussion. During the small group site discussion of the text, the coordinator asked each group to have a scribe (who was on the Google Doc) and when the group found a big idea, the scribe put it directly into the Doc. This really upped the game of accountability and added some spice to the discussion. On the down side, it was difficult for several sites to get on the Doc and they had to add thoughts later (when they went to home computers). These are real challenges faced in outlying areas that impact the learning of teachers and students.

Following is an excerpt from one teacher (from the shared Big Ideas Google Doc):

In class, during our whole group discussion, I found it interesting that many other members highlighted how important "language" is in the world of writing.

How powerful it will be if we can teach our students how to talk about their own writing as well as their peers. These talking/language opportunities allow our students to hear positive, constructive and inspiration words about writing in general, as well as, their own writing specifically.

Just like learning how to discuss books during book clubs...we can teach our students how informed writers speak about each other's writing. Perhaps we begin by using sentence stems that begin to help them formulate their thoughts and to keep the conversation flowing. Some students may be confident enough to generate their own beginning of conversations.

Imagine what writers we will help to create for the future when we teach them how to write and talk about writing. What wonderful conversations will occur? I imagine that students...future

adults...will use this language/conversation skill taught through writing, reading and speaking that will so enrich their lives and others. Perhaps this will lead these writers to become one of the great writers of the future to help us to understand the human condition and our world around us better. Then we can learn, connect and feel with others who may live thousands of miles away. But through their writing we may feel like they are sitting right next to us with a cup of tea engaged in a great conversation that touches our souls. What a wonderful thing that will be!

Conclusions

In reading over the final reflection papers of the teachers who took the class, the coordinator found positive comments overall. Teachers felt supported in their writing instruction. The technology piece was a frustration for a few, but most felt it was a valid way to share thinking and some might try it in their classrooms.

Here are a few comments from teachers who participated in the class:

Reading The Unstoppable Writing Teacher opened my eyes to the importance of students writing every day and gave me ideas of realistic goals to set in my classroom to make the most of writing time. My initial goal was to get my students more comfortable writing independently and to encourage them to come up with their own ideas for writing instead of giving the students writing prompts. The chapter "I am not sure how to work with students who don't know English" was very helpful for me to support the students who were struggling to get started and get more comfortable writing.

-2nd Grade Teacher

I really liked reading Let's Talk. It was an easy read with so many ideas that I have now turned into goals. Conferencing in the middle of the room, the use of the author's chair, and information to use to create anchor charts. I have gained many ideas for my ELL students as well from this book. (Which was one of my goals in the beginning, to help reach my ELL students.)

I enjoyed talking to my partners as well as reading their posts on Google Docs. I always left feeling better about my ability as a teacher. It is nice to hear that others share the same struggles as you. They had some amazing suggestions for my low ELL student that has worked tremendously. So many ideas for me to contemplate and implement. From my student being afraid not unmotivated to starting writing where my student is at, not necessarily where my class is at. These were all strategies that I have used that have made a huge difference in the writing of my student. I feel more prepared to teach writing in the future if I have a student at the same level.

-4th Grade Teacher

The texts read discussed practical, do it today strategies for writer's workshop dilemmas and gave class participants ideas and examples of conferencing with student writers. Teachers left the class having set goals, carried out action steps and reflected on progress. The resources they have will carry them forward in writing instruction and student conferencing. An interactive class can have lifelong impact on instruction, forever changing the way instruction is delivered, teacher knowledge and confidence level.