

Preparing Students to Author Their Future with Writing Workshop

PAUSD K-5 Elementary Education

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“This is how I write. I take a moment—an image, a memory, a phrase, an idea—and I hold it in my hands and declare it a treasure....As human beings we have a deep need to represent our experience. By articulating our experience, we reclaim it for ourselves. We need to make our truths beautiful... As John Cheever explains, ‘When I began to write, I found this was the best way to make sense out of my life.’”

—Lucy McCormick Calkins,
The Art of Teaching Writing

Why is it so important to teach our children to write well? Writing gives us a voice and a chance to make meaning in our lives. Writing is a foundational skill necessary to thrive in the global community and economy. Writing empowers us to make change in our world. In our efforts to provide highly effective writing instruction and address Common Core State Standards, over the past two years, the Palo Alto Unified School District has begun a partnership with the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project (TCRWP) out of Columbia University. This partnership has provided opportunities for K-8 teachers to be trained in the implementation of Writing Workshop using the grade level specific Units of Study in Opinion, Information, and Narrative Writing written by TCRWP.

The Units of Study curriculum is a flexible and rigorous writing program that is research-based and is aligned to Common Core Standards. This internationally renowned program has shown positive results with students in classrooms across the country and around the world and reflects over three decades of academic collaboration. The units are laid out in a comprehensive scope and sequence that spans each grade level and is articulated across grade levels K-8. More detailed information about the foundational research that underpins the units of study can be found at <http://readingandwritingproject.org/about/research-base>.



Photo from commons.wikimedia.org

The Units of Study emphasize that teachers create environments that lend themselves to authentic writing practices and experiences for their students. The Writing Workshop is built on the principles of the apprenticeship learning model. In this model, the focus of writing instruction is on producing more proficient writers by modeling and explicitly teaching the process and thinking of real authors, rather than on creating individual writing projects. Many of the ideas that support the workshop model can be attributed to Brian Cambourne's work on oral and written literacy development, often referred to as Cambourne's Conditions for Learning. There are 3 Underlying Philosophical Principles that run through all of the Units of Study and they are: *Independence*, *Choice* and *Volume*.

Independence: The primary goal of the Writer's Workshop Units of Study is student independence in writing. Each lesson starts with a mini-lesson that explicitly teaches writing skills and strategies. During the mini-lesson the teacher often demonstrates how to apply the skill by modeling it in their own writing. The students are then actively engaged in a short exercise in which they are asked to practice the new skill before they are sent off to practice independently in their own writing projects. The majority of the Writer's Workshop is work time where students are independently writing. The belief is that students get better through the process of practice and approximation with regular feedback. During this work time the independence of the students allows the

teacher to pull groups of students to work on specific areas of need or to confer with students about their individual writing, providing differentiated feedback that promotes growth. The workshop closes with a teaching share that may showcase the work of a student that has taken on the teaching point of the day or highlight another skill. In all parts of the workshop, the goal is to provide structure and support for students to take on the challenge of writing for themselves.

Choice: The second underlying foundational piece of the Writer's Workshop is student choice. Students not only have the freedom to make choices about the topics for their pieces, but they also gain practice in making choices about HOW to write them. This may translate into pieces that are not as perfect at first, however the practice of making these choices and reflecting upon their success is critical for building student capacity to write independently. The goal is for students to transfer writing proficiency to tasks in all subject areas and aspects of their life. Students are asked to remain in the focus genre, but are encouraged to pick a topic that they feel will facilitate good writing. For example, if the class is studying informational writing a student may choose to write their piece on a video game that they know a lot about. That choice enables the student to focus their cognitive capacity on the work of improving the craft of their writing. The teacher can teach all of the skills of a specific genre of writing without dictating the topic(s). In fact, research supports that students are

often far more engaged when they have selected their own topic which facilitates the learning of the skills associated with the genre because there is more motivation to write when the child has an authentic purpose for writing.

Volume: In his book, *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell postulates that it takes 10,000 hours of practice for someone to master a skill. Just as in sports, music, and art, a writer cannot expect to improve their writing without spending significant amounts of time on task. A classic Writing Workshop session has long periods of time where students are engaged and focused on composing and strengthening their writing pieces. Giving students the freedom of choice over topic allows students to remain motivated while spending the large amounts of focused time necessary to make significant growth in writing. Most students improve more rapidly by repeatedly going through the writing process with more and more independence, rather than focusing on polishing a single piece. Because of this, within a unit, writers will be engaged in writing many pieces, some of which may never become published work.

As our students take on the work of becoming independent and strategic writers, our goal is that Writing Workshop will equip them with the tools and strategies they need to effectively communicate their ideas, shift with the rapidly changing global community, and author a meaningful future.

More about Cambourne's Conditions for Learning can be found at:

<http://www.education.com/reference/article/Cambournes-literacy-development/>

Things to expect:

- Your student(s) will become more articulate about their writing work, describing not only what they are doing, but how, and why they are doing it.
- Your student(s) will be able to utilize academic vocabulary about specific writing skills and craft.
- You student(s) will start to recognize writing skills and craft moves when reading.
- Your student(s) will be able to perform with greater achievement and independence on a variety of tasks involving writing across subject areas.
- The majority of the writing that comes home will not be polished and free of grammatical and spelling errors. The writing will be a true representation of what your child is capable of writing independently at that given moment in time.

For more information on how you can support your child in writing please visit:

http://readingandwritingproject.com/public/themes/rwproject/resources/docs/Ed_Leadership_Parents_as_Writing_Partners_1.pdf