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MENTORS IN THE WRITING WORKSHOP

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative research study investigated the observed behaviors and reported experiences of 4th grade students when mentor texts were used to teach mini-lessons and model the writer's craft to improve student writing. Writing was observed and assessed regularly during writing conferences using multiple forms of formative assessment. Data were gathered using surveys, student feedback, teacher observations, and student work. By coding and analyzing the data, several themes emerged. The action research showed that the use of mentor text is valuable in the writing workshop and does improve student writing by modeling the craft of professional writers. A baseline assessment was assessed and compared to a narrative that students completed through a process approach which demonstrated significant improvement in student writing. While the results of the survey and student feedback reinforced this theme they also brought to light a separate theme. The teacher, whether modeling writing or conferencing with the student, is central to the writing workshop. The mentoring process is not limited to mentor text; instead the teacher also needs to write with his or her students. For mentor text to be successful teachers need to explicitly teach students how to identify the writer's craft and apply it in their writing. Teachers also need to differentiate and model the use of mentor text through one-on-one conferencing.

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STANCE

My fourth grade class sits around me as I began to read the short story, “Eleven” by Sandra Cisneros, *“What they don't understand about birthdays and what they never tell you is that when you're eleven, you're also ten, and nine, and eight, and seven, and six, and five, and four, and three, and two, and one. And when you wake up on your eleventh birthday you expect to feel eleven, but you don't.”*

The introduction hooks my listeners and I move on, *“You don't feel eleven. Not right away. It takes a few days, weeks even, sometimes even months before you say Eleven when they ask you. And you don't feel smart eleven, not until you're almost twelve. That's the way it is. Only today I wish I didn't have only eleven years rattling inside me like pennies in a tin Band-Aid box. Today I wish I was one hundred and two instead of eleven because if I was one hundred and two I'd have known what to say when Mrs. Price put the red sweater on my desk.”*

The students are enraptured by the story, drawn in by the familiar details that they too have experienced in one way or another. Heads nod, students giggle. What is this magic that this writer does? How does she take a moment that would mean little to a bystander and bring words to life so that the reader not only sits with her in that classroom, but experiences the entire scenario as if she was pulling the red itchy sweater, with oversized buttons that smelled of cottage

cheese, over his or her own arms? It is beyond imagery, more telepathic or even time trippy. *“I put one arm through one sleeve of the sweater that smells like cottage cheese, and then the other arm through the other and stand there with my arms apart like the sweater hurts me and it does, all itchy and full of germs that aren't even mine.”*

Gross! The itchy wool of the red sweater scratches my own arm. The flush of embarrassment, all too familiar to each one of us, rushes through my arms and I empathize with this character. How does she do it?

I finish reading and ask my students the question that I myself cannot quite answer, “How does she do it?” “What did the author do that made that writing so amazing?” Hands shoot up around me and suddenly my students are talking like real writers. Some point out the writer’s use of details and give examples from the story to show what they can’t quite say in words. Others discuss the figurative language, the repetition, and the humor. How amazing! Not only are my students talking like writers, they are using language that demonstrates the comprehension of the story as well. What a fabulous reading, writing connection. What more, I wonder, would I be able to do with this approach to teaching writing? Would it motivate my struggling writers? Could it improve student organization in their writing? How will it affect student voice?

School years are a bit foggy for me. Most memories are tinted in an orange hue and smell like a school cafeteria or plastic school bus seats. I don't remember learning to write, per say, instead I remember learning to write letters and cursive. Not till middle school do I remember any sort of lessons on writing and these memories are full of frustration, disappointment and red ink. Grammar was repeated practice. It was boring and I didn't like it. My writing was ok; however, it never sounded as eloquent and tangible as others.

Since that time I have spent my writing life sort of figuring things out as I go along. I don't consider myself the most eloquent writer. The word or image I am looking for is usually stored in some inaccessible recess of my mind at the exact moment I need to use it and no matter the rummaging I do I can't seem to find it. However, I will, on occasion, have moments of pure genius when the words flow like a stream, highlighted by bits of humor, insight, imagery and in those moments I feel accomplished, like I've created something worth reading and thinking about, at least for a few minutes. And, if I get really lucky I might even coax a chuckle, or snigger out of my reader, and this is the most amazing thing about writing. I like to read, and so, my writing often sounds like the author of the book that I have most recently finished. Prior to becoming a teacher I had never heard of using a "mentor text" to improve writing, but in a way I had already stumbled upon this unique and powerful teaching tool.

My accidental experiences using mentor text has provoked me to ask the following question: what are the observed behaviors and reported experiences of students when implementing mentor text to teach writing in a fourth grade classroom. There are several possible answers to this question. I feel that using mentor text to teach writing will, as I have experienced in my own writing, improve student voice as they emulate the voice of the writer. However, I believe it will also improve far more than their voice. I also believe that the use of mentor texts will improve student focus, content, style, and sentence fluency. In addition I believe that the by applying concepts such as plot and figurative language in their writing there will be an improvement in students' ability to recognize these craft elements in their reading.

I am curious to see how this approach to teaching writing will impact my ELL students. These students have difficulty expressing their ideas due to their limited vocabulary. I feel that by using a mentor text the students will have a concrete example of the skill that is being taught and will imitate what the author has done and help to broaden the vocabulary they use in their writing.

Mentor text could also improve my students' reading and writing as they read not just from a reader's point of view but rather from a writer's point of view. The mentor text will act as the model for the skills I would like my students to apply and therefore will emulate the best practice approach of gradually

releasing responsibility. I also think that reading as a writer and analyzing and practicing literary skills as a writer will improve students' reading comprehension. All of these are possible answers to my question; however, I know there are so many more possible answers hidden in my future research.

I journey forward as teacher, researcher, student and writer. My hope is that through this strategy not only will my students' writing improve but that they will also learn to respect the authors that write the books they love, to learn from them and begin to realize that they too are real writers with a voice that deserves to be heard.

LITERATURE REVIEW

With the stroke of a pen a writer can paint a vivid image for the reader to not merely read, but experience. Of course the sort of artistic prowess required to create such an image comes from models, both teachers who are not only writers themselves but experts in the field of writing and professional writers. Routman (2005) says, "There is no shortcut to helping students become effective writers, and there is no program you can buy that will do it for you" (p. 240). So why do so many students and even teachers find writing to be so difficult? Because it is complex and drowning in rules; writers are faced with the difficult task of using words to paint on the page and bring to life something that they have created, much like an artist. "Even the most accomplished writers say that writing is

challenging” (National Writing Project, 2006, p. 9). Ernest Hemingway once said that “There is nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and bleed” (As quoted in Chideya, 2007). While novelist Somerset Maugham was quoted as saying, “There are three rules for writing a novel. Unfortunately no one knows what they are” (Graham, 2008, p. 3). The teaching of writing is an art just like writing itself. Though writing may indeed be more like art than a science, state assessments and writing standards dictate the way teachers teach writing and have usurped the joy from writing for too many students (Routman, 2005). However, Routman believes that teachers don’t have to view high-stakes testing as the enemy and can instead view it as a challenge to teach writing well.

Ralph Fletcher (2011) shares the story of Walt Whitman, who was unknown until the publishing of his book of poetry, Leaves of Grass. Upon publishing his great work he was quoted as saying, “I was simmering, simmering, simmering... Emerson brought me to a boil” (As quoted in Fletcher, 2011). Students are, as Fletcher (2011) points out, simmering as well. The job of teachers is to bring them to a boil. (Fletcher, 2011) According to Dorfman & Capelli (2007) and Fletcher (2011) using the quality writing of others, also called mentor text, is a best practice to improve students’ voice and style in their writing. By honing in on the reading/ writing connection, teaching a process writing approach and understanding the criteria by which students should be assessed,

teachers can become more confident and effective as facilitators of the writing workshop.

What is a mentor text?

Noden (1999) says “The writer is an artist, painting images of life with specific and identifiable brush strokes, images as realistic as Wyeth and as abstract as Picasso” (p. 1). Artists often gather inspiration from other artists to learn their craft and aspiring chefs sample the cooking of professionals as they hone the art of cooking. Just as artists and chefs look to the experts in their fields, so too should children as they become writers (Fletcher, 2001). “Powerful writing seems to contain a magical essence; one we hope might somehow rub off on us. (Fletcher (2011), p. 3) “We all need mentors in our lives- those knowledgeable others who help us learn how to be teachers, mothers, musicians, artists, athletes who help us do what we could not do before on our own,” say Dorfman and Cappelli, 2007, p. 2.

According to Dorfman and Cappelli (2007) mentor texts are pieces of literature that teachers can use in the classroom to model writing for young writers. These books can be revisited continuously to teach various writing traits and skills that young writers are not yet able to use on their own. Mentor texts become a partner to the teacher and a model that students can imitate as they write. As writers read and learn to imitate professional authors, they also begin to envision the writer that they can become (p. 2). “Mentor texts help writers notice

things about an author's work that is not like anything they might have done before, and empower them to try something new" (Dorfman and Cappelli, 2007, p.3)

The idea of utilizing mentor text to improve student writing is not novel. Calkins (2006) says, "A second way to lift the level of student writing is to rally children to look really closely at the ways in which the writer create texts" (p. VI) She tells teachers to have students read literature that emulates what they themselves are writing and to question what the author does that grabs or draws them into a story.

Peter Lancia (1997) identified that his second graders spontaneously borrowed ideas from literature that was read in class to "create their own writing piece" (p. 2). From this realization, he designed a study to "identify patterns in and sources of literary borrowing" (p. 2). Of the 21 children who took part in his study carried out in his second grade classroom, five were identified as Title 1 students, three were learning disabled, and one was classified as gifted. Lancia collected data from writing conferences, interviews and student samples, including the 417 pieces students wrote in his classroom over the course of the school year. He found that the children borrowed ideas from literature in five different ways. They borrowed the plot and characters, often writing new material for the character or continuing the plot. Writers also borrowed structural

elements of a series or unique story grammar elements. Stylistic patterns such as humor were also integrated into the students' writing. In addition to borrowing elements from professional authors, the study also showed how students borrowed ideas from one another and that during the study period a unique community of writers developed. As a result Lancia believes that, "adopting the ideas of already established authors appears to be a significant stage in a child's writing development" (Lancia, 1997, p.5).

The Reading/Writing Connection

Though writing is often taught in isolation, "numerous studies and assessments have shown that reading development does not take place in isolation; instead, a child develops simultaneously as reader, listener, speaker, and writer" (National Writing Project and Nagin, 2006, p. 33). Instead of viewing writing as a subject that should be taught separate from other subjects we should take into consideration the research that demonstrates the strong connection between reading and writing.

What better way to help students make connections between the skills in reading to help them write better than to integrate the use of mentor text into the writing classroom. Tompkins (2001) notes, the strategies of organizing, monitoring, questioning and revising meaning used by readers and writers are the same in both the processes. In addition similar skills such as plot, text structure, and phonics are used by both readers and writers.

Butler and Turbill (1987) also discuss the similarities of the reading and writing processes. Both are acts of composing and require the use of background knowledge, experience and comprehension. They state that writing results from the “clever orchestration” of chunks of language acquired through many interactions with language and then stored for later use. Butler and Turbill (1987) believe that students should be exposed to a variety of literature and print sources “in order to build up [their] linguistic storehouse, so that [they] in turn can use the language to which [they] have been exposed. This is the way we learn the language of books, the language of literacy” (p. 16).

According to Dahl and Farnan (1998) an investigation into reading’s influence on children’s writing showed evidence that reading had impacted student writing. The stories that the children had written included features found in published pieces, including well-structured endings, title pages and ellipses to show a continuance of events. “Literature gives writers support for topics, word choices, spellings, story beginnings and endings, and illustrations” (p. 81).

Shanahan (1987) asked if teachers should expect writing instruction to enhance reading achievement automatically without explicit instruction. His subjects consisted of twelve second grade and nine fifth grade classes, representing a heterogeneous sample in regards to SES and race. He found that, though reading and writing do overlap, they are not identical in terms of

underlying knowledge. However, he concluded that the lack of overlap is a result of memory processes. Shanahan states that memory access requires a stimulus that allows someone to recall certain memories, but if memory routes are unequal, new knowledge can become fixed. By this Shanahan means that students may be unable to make connections between reading knowledge and the connection to writing knowledge. For instance, a vocabulary word learned in the context of reading may become fixed and is then only accessible to the student when reading. Or a student may understand the concept of plot in a story but then is unable to apply the concept of plot as an author to his or her writing without the teacher's explicit instruction. Shanahan infers that if teachers can make explicit connections for their students, they may become metacognitively aware of the knowledge sharing between reading and writing and likely utilize skills more interchangeably.

Fletcher (2001) says that our most eloquent writers are usually avid readers. They understand how to craft a story like a professional writer by "lingering at the right moment" or "writing by ear" (p. 74). Many students build this ear by having good mentors; however, many students cannot make this same connection on their own. Fletcher (2001) states that "good teaching can help all children make the reading-writing connections that certain students have seemingly made on their own" (p. 74).

Reading In the Writing Classroom

“I learned how to write from writers. I didn’t know any personally, but I read” (As quoted in Buckner, 2005, p. 55).

Beyond direct instruction on how to use what other authors have done to improve their own writing, students need to learn how to read like a writer; after all, expert writers were first expert readers and listeners. “Word by word is how we learn to hear and read, which seems only fitting, because it is how the books we are reading were written in the first place” (Prose, 2006, p. 5).

Writing is more like art in its process, and words are the “medium we use in much the same way a composer uses notes, the way a painter uses paint” (Prose, 2006, p. 16). Students need opportunities to read and discuss a text before the text can be analyzed for the writer’s craft and used as a mentor for students to write. According to Butler and Turbill (1987), in order to teach children to learn to write like a writer they must first read like a writer. They feel that our classrooms should immerse students in reading, demonstrate multiple purposes for writing, and help students make the connections between reading and writing. Aimee Buckner (2005) points out that writers approach a book differently than “regular” people. She uses her friend, a seamstress, as an example. Instead of shopping for clothes like everyone else, looking at price tags and trying on clothes, her friend looks at how the clothes are made. Her friend looks at clothes

to get ideas. The writer who reads is similar, in that the reader is shopping for ideas in a writer's work rather than just reading for the story.

Writers admire other writers. They read to soak up the essence of their favorite authors. They are aware of how characters are being developed, how the words are put together to create a mood, and how the writer's style affects the reader. (Buckner, 2005, p.56)

Fletcher (2001) believes that reading should become an essential part of the writing classroom. He states that the reading/writing connection needs to begin with a community of readers. Reading aloud helps build relationships as it creates common experiences among students and is vital in the classroom not only because it adds to the plethora of experiences for the avid readers, but also because not all children are read to at home (p.77). Fletcher also believes that it is important to have a set of books with which the class is familiar. He suggests reading and discussing books in smaller literature circles. When students are familiar with a book it can be used to talk about how writers craft their writing and how students can make similar choices. Fletcher's beliefs match Butler and Turbill's (1987) who also concur with the practice of first introducing a mentor text to students as readers, before using it to teach a mini-lesson. He says that good readers will focus on making sense of the story and understanding the plot.

This will distract them from focusing on the author's craft. Therefore, a mentor text is most useful when it is introduced prior to being used in a mini-lesson.

Literature should become a part of the classroom community before students are taught to read as a writer. To effectively model the writing of others, students should be immersed in a piece of writing and enjoy the story itself before they can focus on the writer's craft, says Dorfman and Cappelli (2007). The connections students make in their reading will lead to a deep comprehension and "unearth a treasure chest of memories" (p. 20). Through mentor text, students may begin to recognize that they have had similar experiences and feelings to those they read about. This will empower them to write about their own experiences as they realize that everyday moments are worth sharing.

Mini-lessons

Shanahan's 1987 study is just one which demonstrates that direct instruction of the writer's craft is a best practice for writing instruction. Fletcher (2011) would agree with Shanahan. Teachers share well-crafted pieces with sparkling prose and fluid figurative language to improve student writing; however, this is not as easy as it sounds. "It turns out that this magical essence is not so simple to extract. And once extracted it doesn't transfer easily to the student who reads it." (Fletcher, 2011, p. 4) Mentor text can be used as a catalyst for changing the way teachers approach the mini-lesson and the kind of writing teachers can expect from their students. Calkins (1994) defines a mini-lesson as

“making a suggestion to the whole class” that is based on what the students in the classroom are ready for and need to develop as writers (p. 193). Routman (2005) quotes Calkin’s statement that “in the mini-lesson we teach *into* our students’ intentions,” or otherwise that we teach what our students need and are ready to learn so that they may grow as writers. (p. 154) Fletcher (2001) points out how literature can model how authors write about similar topics but in different ways. Dorfman & Capelli (2007) explains that mentor text can be used in mini lessons, throughout the day and across the curriculum to make strategies “visible” to students. They suggest saying something such as the following to students:

“We have been working on how an author reveals his character to his readers, and I want to show you how I use this knowledge as I write” (p. 12).

Fletcher (2011) makes a valid warning in his newest book, however. There is a subtle approach that should be taken when using the mentor text. The following email from a sixth grade student helped him realize that well-meaning teachers were, “Fletcherizing” their students. (p.5)

“Dear Ralph Fletcher,

This year all we have done is use your books as anchor text. All we’ve been doing is try to write like Ralph Fletcher. It hasn’t been fun. To tell

you the truth it's been wicked boring! Basically, you ruined 6th grade for me and the other kids in my class. Thanks a lot! (p. 4)

A balance should be struck between force feeding a mentor text and inviting students to “look at these texts and enter into them on their own terms,” which will allow more ownership and “respect the transactional dynamic” present in reading. (Fletcher, 2011, p. 5)

Dorfman & Capelli (2007) would agree with Fletcher and suggest the gradual release of responsibility model. Some students need time to practice and experience the strategies before they become automatic. By playing around with a technique and through guided experiences students will begin to recognize how they themselves may be able to use it in their own writing. “During these times, the workshop might look and feel more like a laboratory,” says Dorfman & Capelli (2007), “everybody is experimenting with the same thing perhaps not in the same way or in the same contest, but working toward the same result” (p. 13). As the teacher draws on mentor texts, student’s writing can take off. Fletcher says, “with you as a guide and literature as the landscape, you can open young writers’ eyes to the full range of possibilities before them” (p. 82).

Ray Corden (2007) investigated the impact of explicit (direct) instruction of literary devices on the quality of children’s narrative writing in his UK study. As a result of a widening reading/writing gap in the UK, Corden (2007) attempted

to identify the impact of explicit instruction of literary devices on student writing by asking, “Can children’s writing be enhanced by teachers drawing attention to the literary devices used by professional writers or ‘mentor authors’?” (p. 269).

Eighteen teacher researchers from nine elementary schools participated in the social constructivist study. The chosen schools were located in both rural and urban areas representing a variety of socio economic and cultural backgrounds. The teachers agreed to implement direct instruction of literary devices with discussion followed by independent writing. The data collected over one school year consisted of student writing, videotaped conference sessions, and audio recordings of teacher-child conferences. Corden (2007) found “significant progress in the assessment categories of structure and style” (p. 276). While UK students are expected to advance one “level” every two years, 77 of the 96 participants advanced one level and 19 advanced two levels in this one-year period.

Improving Craft

Through reading work written by professional authors, students get a “taste” of the craft of professional authors and learn the language, structure and elements that make up a good story. Dahl and Farnan (1998) define craft as the skills, expertise and strategies that writers use to write well. The craft of writing includes all of the strategies writers use to compose a written piece and can be learned through professional authors who become mentors for young writers.

“Words are an author’s tools and like any good craftsman, an author chooses his or her tools with great care. (Ehmann and Gayer, (2009) p. 9) Fletcher and Portalupi (1998) call craft the “cauldron in which the writing gets forged” (p.3). Mini lessons on elements such as alliteration, circular endings, descriptive language, flash backs, and leads using mentor texts can help students become more autonomous and specific in their craft as writers.

Some Best Practices for the Writing Workshop

Mentors and conferencing

I have come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It’s my personal approach that creates the climate. It’s my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I possess tremendous power to make a child’s life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. (As quoted in Fletcher,1993, p. 9)

The importance of mentors is pointed out by Vygostsky (1978), who states, “Indeed, can it be doubted that children learn speech from adults or that, through asking questions and giving answers, children acquire a variety of information or that through imitating adults and through being instructed about how to act, children develop an entire repository of skills?” (pg. 84) In the writing workshop children learn to imitate not just mentor authors but their

teachers. Vygotsky also points out that children, with adult guidance or in groups, are capable of imitation that exceeds their own limited capabilities.

“Our classrooms,” Fletcher (1993) points out, “are filled with students desperate for adults who care about writing and books as much as they do.” (p.

10) Yes, mentors can be found in books but mentors take on many forms.

Fletcher recounts many of his mentors as he became a writer. Some were authors that he read, while others were teachers or other writers with whom he had built a relationship. However, all of his mentors had things in common. They had high standards, built on student’s strengths valued originality and diversity, encouraged students to take risks, were passionate and looked at the big picture. “Passion remains the most important quality the mentor has to offer. When we think back on those teachers we looked up to, we don’t always remember exactly what they taught. Above everything, we remember passion, fire” (Fletcher, 2005, p.17).

“The writing conference lies at the heart of the writing workshop,” says Fletcher and Portalupi (2001), (p.48). It’s the teacher’s opportunity to dialogue one-on-one with a student and in doing so the teacher has the opportunity to make suggestions or affirm what the writer has done. “ Only through communication can human life hold meaning,” says Friere (1970) as he points out the necessity of communication in the classroom (p.77). “The teacher’s thinking is authenticated only by the authenticity of the students’ thinking. The teacher cannot think for

her students, nor can she impose her thought on them. Authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about reality, does not take place in ivory tower isolation, but only in communication” (Freire, 1970, p. 77). This is no truer than in a writing conference where teachers are able to dialogue with their students about a writing piece. Reggie Routman (2005) says that the writing conference is a “meeting to discuss student work” (p. 206). There are various purposes and types of conferences. Conferences don’t necessarily have to be one-on-one, as Fletcher discusses. Rather they can be whole-class, roving, peer, or one-on-one. “In a peer conference, students take on the advisory role we have been demonstrating through whole-class share and one-on-one conferences,” says Routman (2005). (p. 219) However, Routman points out the importance of first modeling conferencing through whole class, one-on-one and then teacher guided peer conferencing before students are able to effectively master the peer conference. Even then, the teacher will still need to make suggestions regarding organization, style, craft and structure, “most students do not have the sophisticated knowledge to give the kind of feedback that we can give” (Routman, 2005, p. 219).

A process approach

According to Nagin and the National Writing Project (2006) years of research has shown that instructional strategies taught in isolation fail to improve student writing. Instead writing should be taught using a process approach. “The

writing process is anything a writer does from the time the idea came until the piece is completed or abandoned” (As quoted in Nagin, 2006, p22). Teachers need to develop the student author’s understanding of the writing process. As we use mentor text to model the writing of professional authors’ dialogue can be had regarding the process approach professional authors take as they write. Students may not recognize how professional authors prewrite and plan, or the enormous amount of time they spend revising. The writing process is not a linear, step by step process of brainstorming, drafting, revising, editing and publishing a written piece; neither is the process “one size fits all” (Fletcher, 2001, p.62). Each writer is unique and instead of teaching one process, we need to help each student find a process that works best for him or her. Pritchard and Honeycutt (2007) note that ensuring that all students understand the complexity of the writing process is as important as the writing community.

There are several stages that students will go through when composing a written piece. The first is prewriting or brainstorming. Fletcher (2001) defines prewriting as the cognitive warm-up that comes before writing, much as an athlete warms up before a competition. Pritchard and Honeycutt (2007) say that prewriting is similar to activating schema in reading as it forms a framework for the writing piece. One U.S. National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) study of 7,000 fourth graders, 11,000 eighth graders and 11,500 twelfth graders looked at the impact of instruction in the writing process on students’

writing. They found that students who were constantly encouraged to use the writing process and prewrite prior to beginning their writing piece tended to write better than students who were not encouraged to use the writing process. The writing ability of students whose teachers consistently encouraged them to use various strategies included in the writing process tended to have a higher writing ability. Also, the students who were encouraged to use prewriting strategies had the tendency to attain higher writing scores than students who did not use prewriting strategies. However, the prewriting strategies that were most effective were lists, outlines and diagrams. Unrelated notes, drawings or drafts performed no better than students who did not use prewriting strategies. (Dahl & Farnan, 1998)

The second phase of the writing process is drafting. In this phase writing fluency often becomes a burden for writers whose oral fluency is ahead of their writing fluency. Fletcher (2001) explains, “A boy is mentally on the second paragraph of his story, but his hand has written only one sentence” (p. 64). He goes on to say that helping students separate the drafting phase from the editing phase is important to increasing writing fluency. However, Fletcher warns that we should still have high expectations for the first draft and not “encourage sloppy habits” (p. 64).

Revising eventually follows drafting in the writing process. Routman (2005) says, “Revision means, literally, to see again” (p. 156). Though many students believe revision means to change a few words here and there, it is actually a thinking process and requires rereading, rewriting, revaluing, reconsidering and rethinking. However, most students have an attitude that says, “I’ve-done-it-now-I’m-done-with-it” (Fletcher, 2001, p. 65). Fletcher suggests that we not force students to revise but instead show them that revising enhances an already great piece. He also suggests making sure that students understand the difference between editing and revising so that corrections in mechanics do not come before the “radical surgery that leads to improved writing” (p. 66). Routman agrees with Fletcher and points out that focusing on grammar and mechanics in the drafting phase may adversely impact the writing quality. Both Fletcher (2001) and Routman (2005) recommend that the teacher model how to revise with their own work to show the thinking that goes on behind revising.

Proofreading, editing and publishing usually follow revision, though the non-linear process of writing suggests that these steps may come after much jumping between drafting, revising and prewriting. Students need to learn to value conventions, which occurs through writing for an audience. Editing should come only after students can produce quality work (Routman, 2005). In the end, students have the choice of whether they would like to publish a piece. Though a student may visit and revisit several of the steps in the writing process, a piece is

never finished, and a “final copy” is no more than a submitted draft. As Valery, the French poet, states, “a poem is never complete; it is abandoned” (as quoted in Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2007, p. 33).

Voice and Style

Graves (2003) describes voice as the underlying human voice in every piece of writing, and Fletcher (2007) describes it as “a quirky humanness that makes us know beyond a doubt that the author is a real person talking to us” (p. 64). Lenski and Verbruggen (2010) feel that voice in writing is like a fingerprint and is distinctive of the writer. Like a friend’s voice on the phone, voice helps us decipher one writer from another (p. 85).

Style is different than voice in that voice reveals a writer’s personality, while style is the tool that the writer uses to express himself or herself in his or her writing (Lenski & Verbruggen, 2010). “It is frequently the case that writers entertain, move and inspire us less by what they say than by how they say it. *What* they say is information and ideas and (in the case of fiction) story and characters. *How* they say it is style” (as quoted in Lenski & Verbruggen, (2010), p.86). Some teachers believe that voice and style are not teachable; however, aspects such as word choice can be and these can impact the way an author expresses an idea. Lancia (1997) agrees that students can borrow voice and style and that this borrowing should not be considered stealing, since the process of imitation is how we all learn. Noden (1999) points out that style is also directly

related to grammar which begins with the writer learning to “literally and metaphorically see” (p.2). He goes on to say, “When the author lacks a visual eye, his or her writing has no heart and soul; images lie lifeless like cadavers in a morgue” (p.2).

Mentor text can be used to improve student voice and style in writing. Pritchard and Honeycutt (2007) say that students can imitate the voices of professional authors. Reading aloud improves vocabulary; therefore, mentor text can also assist students with their word choice. Pritchard and Honeycutt (2007) suggest the use of poetry to improve student word choice. Fletcher (2007) points out; students believe that using adjectives to make their sentences more descriptive improves their writing. He argues, though, that too many adjectives leads to loquacious writing and instead the answer lies in stronger verbs. Teachers can help young writers by using mentor texts to strategically demonstrate the intentionality of professional author’s word choice.

Assessment of writing

The goal of assessing writing should not be to just give grades but rather for students to learn and grow as writers. Dahl and Farnan (1998) says that the primary purpose of assessment is for students to learn what works in a writing task (p.111). Routman (2005) believes that the assessment *of* learning needs to be balanced with assessment *for* learning. She believes that for a valid assessment of student progress teachers need to look at students’ writing over time, for

purposeful communication to real audiences. She also suggests that even the best intentions in regards to assessment can become a waste of time based on teacher's knowledge in regards to writing. Mechanics don't make a piece of writing memorable; instead, "the inspiration isn't in that; it's in the language, the way the piece flows and is organized, the impact the words have on the reader" (p. 239).

Though writing is more than grades, assessments are a part of life for all teachers and students and it is important that assessment measures in the classroom are fair and valid. Routman (2005) would be quick to remind us that a rubric is an "evaluation tool" or checklist list which identifies the "criteria" by which a writing piece will be assessed (p. 240). Criteria, she goes on to explain, defines the expectations of those traits based on grade level. Rubrics can be effective measuring tools for the writing classroom. Content rubrics give "explicit criteria to frame the writing and define the task" whereas evaluation rubrics "provide criteria explaining how the writing will be rated or scored" (p.242). Rubrics can be holistic or analytic and are helpful in guiding decisions for instruction and goal setting. They can be used by teachers and students to evaluate writing, what should be worked on and what goals to set. In the end teachers should remember that good writing is about becoming reflective writers; communication, not grades, is the end goal. (Routman, 2005)

According to research the key to writing assessment is a knowledgeable teacher. The National Council of Teachers of English (2004) agree with Routman as they believe that teachers need to understand the various methods of assessment and be able to distinguish between formative assessment, on the spot judgments, and summative assessments, the final judgment of student's work. The NCTE also believes that the teacher must be an expert in the assessment of writing. They provide a list (Appendix C) stating what they believe a teacher must know to be excellent in the assessment of writing.

Routman (2005) agrees with the final bullet on the NCTE list as she suggests that the missing element in assessment is the reflective piece on the part of the writer. Routman suggests that students take ownership of the writers craft and be critical of their own work (p. 253).

Assessment of writing needs to be both summative and formative. Calkins (1994) suggests developing a system to document writing conferences and observations as one means of authentic, formative assessment. She also suggests saving drafts and editing checklists. An authentic, summative assessment that can document progress over time is the portfolio. Calkins (1994) calls the portfolio "a record of the writer's journey" (p. 324). She suggests that the portfolio not just be a collection of writing but something that has purpose.

METHODOLOGY

Research Goals

There is something magical about writing, a sort of otherworldliness where we become enraptured by a story so much so that our involvement stays with us for life. As a child I read many horse books. I was not able to have my own horse but discovered that I could own them through the stories I read. I've ridden Triple Crown winners, Olympic jumpers and watched foals enter the world on spindly legs. I rode along with Alec in all of Walter Farley's *Black Stallion* stories, and once cried so hard at the end of a book that my mother's friend asked if I wanted him to tear up the book. The words of these authors are still vividly painted in my mind's eye and I still think fondly of the characters as I do friends I haven't seen in a while. The mystical ability that books have to teleport me to a different place and time continues to amaze me and it is this power that I want to bequeath to my students. Though a fourth grade student may not yet be able to create such worlds I believe they can begin to understand the magic of an author's craft through the use of mentor texts. My question sought to understand the place mentor texts have in the writing classroom and I wondered: could students discover the craft of professional authors and apply it in their own writing? My hope was that they would model the writing of professional authors and improve their voice and writing style and that maybe, just maybe, my students would begin to play with words in a way that would cast a spell on their readers.

Setting

My study took place in my fourth grade classroom at the Lehigh Valley Charter Academy. I have a 50 minute writing block on Tuesday afternoon, right after lunch and recess. I also have a writing block on Thursday mornings from 8:30 to 9:30. On Fridays we have a 30 minute RTI block that I also use for writing. Mini-lessons took place on Tuesdays and Thursdays. On these days I would teach a full lesson or mini lesson. The second half of the writing block would be given to the students to apply the skill directly to their narratives which they worked on throughout the trimester. During Friday's RTI block no instruction was given instead this time was used solely for writing and conferencing. When students finished their morning work they were also asked to work on writing. The time each student had in the morning varied depending on the students pace completing other assignments. Of course there were other opportunities to write during the week, but these times were focused on other writing assignments.

The charter school I work for has a unique population as our students originate in numerous sending districts. The majority of our population stems from Allentown and Bethlehem, while others come from Nazareth, Easton, and other surrounding districts. This means that our population is richly diverse in ethnicity, background and socioeconomic status. My fourth grade classroom consists of 25 students, 12 girls and 13 boys. 72% of my students live in the

Bethlehem Area School District, 16% live in the Easton Area School District, 8% from the East Penn School District and 4% come from the Allentown School District. Although our school is racially diverse, my classroom consists of 56% white/non-Hispanic, 20% Hispanic, 8% African American, 12% Asian/Pacific, and 4% Multiracial. 28% of my students qualify for free or reduced lunch and 32% of my students receive additional support in the areas of reading and/or math. All students participated in class instruction and activities relating to my study but data was only collected from 23 of the 25 of students. One student moved early in the study and another student never returned the release form. I have one student with an IEP for fluency who receives small group instruction outside of the classroom but is part of my writing instruction. I also have two students who were formerly ELL but have been exited from the program.

Trustworthiness

As a researcher I wanted my study to be ethical and trustworthy. So first I completed the Human Studies Internal Review Board application (appendix A) and obtained their approval to pursue my study. Next I notified my administration and parents of the intent, purpose and possible benefits of my study through a written consent form (Appendix B). Though every student in the class participated in the same instruction, students and their families had the choice to participate or withdraw from my study and data collection at any time without penalty.

As a researcher it was my responsibility to ensure that my findings were truthful and accurate in relation to my intent, my students and the reporting of my findings. (Hendricks, 2009; Maclean & Mohr, 1999; Johnson, 2008) As Maclean & Mohr (1999) explain, validity is, “the result of your integrity both as a teacher and as a researcher” (p. 117) It poses the question, “Does your data say what you say it says” (Maclean & Mohr 1999, p. 117)? To ensure validity I implemented my study over a period of sixteen weeks, as a longer period of observation allows the researcher to, “see and confirm patterns than do shorter observations.” (Johnson, 1999, p. 101) Surveys, student works, observations, conferences, participant checks and interviews were all used as data collection sources and I triangulated this data to increase credibility in my study (Burnaford, Fischer & Hobson, 2001; Hendricks, 2009; Maclean & Mohr, 1999; Johnson, 2008).

Methods of Data Collection

Survey data

I began my study by having students complete a survey to better understand my students as writers (Appendix E). Another survey was administered at the end of the study as well to better understand how the students felt about mentor text and the mentoring process (Appendix F).

My Field Log

Throughout my study I recorded my observations, reflections and conversations with students in my field log. To ensure that I had a wide accurate

base of data I also orchestrated participant checks throughout my study to record participant quotes, or low inference descriptors, (Burnaford, Fischer & Hobson, 2001; Hendricks, 2009; Maclean & Mohr, 1999; Johnson, 2008).

Student Work

Student work was a vital source of data during my study. Students completed and submitted a baseline writing sample. The prompt for this writing piece was *A Summer Story* in which students wrote narratives about an event over the summer. I focused my analysis, however, on the narrative with which we applied all of our craft lessons throughout the trimester. Students pre-wrote, drafted, revised, re-wrote and edited this narrative in the writing notebooks. From these notebooks I collected student prewriting samples as well as drafts that showed revisions and editing on various pieces throughout the trimester.

Conferences, Interviews and Participant Checks

Conferences were conducted regularly during our writing blocks. Students were able to request a conference as needed. I kept a checklist of students to ensure that I saw each student over several weeks. If a student did not request a conference, I would request a conference with them. A conference form (see appendix G, p. 149) was to be filled out by the student and a peer reviewer before conferencing with me. The conference forms were collected and used as data as well. During conferences I also used member checks to receive participant feedback that allowed me to test my own assumptions and

observations against student perspectives to ensure that my interpretations were accurate (Hendricks, 2009; Maclean & Mohr, 1999; Johnson, 2008).

Reliability

Maclean & Mohr (1999) point out, “The degree to which you achieve validity determines how useful your research will be to you. It also determines the degree to which your readers will understand and be able to trust your reporting of your research” (Maclean & Mohr, 1999, p. 120). Because this research may also benefit my school community or possibly the writing community at large I desired my study to also be applicable and consistent so that it may be useful to other teachers and students in other classrooms (Hendricks, 2009; Maclean & Mohr, 1999). Although in qualitative research there are numerous variables that impact the outcome of a research study and the consistency of such, I believe that my study could be useful to others, therefore I used “thick description of setting, study and participants” (Hendricks (2009), pg. 115; Maclean & Mohr, 1999).

Finally, I desired my research to further understanding of best practices in the instruction of writing and perhaps help other teachers improve their practice of teaching writing; therefore I desired that my study be reliable. “Reliability in research is the degree to which a study can be repeated by other researchers under the same conditions to yield the same results. It poses the question, “to what degree can I count on the results of this study?”” (Maclean & Mohr 1999, p. 120)

To achieve reliability I will include a detailed account of my classroom, my school, my own demeanor, personality and approach to teaching as well as my beliefs and assumptions that create the dynamic context of my classroom (Maclean & Mohr, 1999). “Context includes the multiple factors that contribute to the creation of the experiences that you and your students have” (Maclean & Mohr, 1999, p.120). I will also continue to reflect on my own teaching practices and my study. If questions arise from my study I will pursue further research to investigate those inquiries, by doing so the cyclical process of action research will continue to change not only my own teaching practice but hopefully the teaching community as well.

Bias

One does not pursue an inquiry with which they do not in some way have a connection. Therefore there is a risk that bias may skew the results of a study and should be taken into consideration (Hendricks, 2009). The teaching of writing has become my passion. My research and study in the art of teaching writing has prompted respect from my peers and administration and with that respect comes great responsibility. I feel that I need to not only write fluently myself but also that I need to be successful in the teaching of writing and in my thesis to provide valid, research based support to my colleagues. It is important that I am honest and forthcoming with the biases I hold so that they do not impede

my perception and analysis of the data I collect as this too is a responsibility I hold as a teacher researcher.

First, I believe that all children can learn to express their thoughts in writing and develop a unique voice all their own. Though some students may not see themselves as authors they can, with encouragement in a safe learning environment, learn to write with voice developed through lessons with mentor text and teacher/student conferences.

Secondly, I believe that mentor text will help students learn to develop their writing voice by providing a model for the student. The students will be able to borrow this voice in their writing as they develop their own style and voice. By experiencing different voices and styles through various mentor text students will be able to find their niche as an author.

I must recognize the possibility that every student may not share my love of writing. It is also possible that the strategy to be implemented may not improve all of the students' voice and style. I also need to recognize the limitations of some students that will impact their growth. For some, cultural influences may have an impact on their writing that will not be changed through the use of this strategy.

OUR STORY

Before you read any further may I explain how our story is unique to our classroom, our school, and the relationship I have with my students? Results will vary in any other situation. No other classroom has my Kevin. Taller than most fourth graders, he resembles a football player but has the heart of a kitten.

They also don't have an Evelyn who writes with natural voice and puts 200% into everything she does or Moses and his wonderful imagination but messy handwriting and resistance to revise or edit anything he writes.

I began talking about mentor text from day one. The students were aware that we were looking at how authors write so that we could learn to write better. We discussed mentor text frequently and it became so automatic that it was part of almost every conversation that took place in the writing workshop.

My story follows the lessons I taught using mentor text. However, I have included sections where the students are just writing because much of the writing workshop was simply spent writing or conferencing. It was during these conferences that I was able to go back to the mentor text that I had used in a mini lesson to teach something that the student I was conferencing with needed at that very moment. In one conference I suggested that Evelyn, who was ready to work ahead, find a few mentor texts to revise her introduction even though I had not yet taught it. Then in later in the trimester I taught a whole class lesson on writing

introductions because most of the class was ready. Writing naturally diversifies itself; the teacher cannot control it; thus the writing conference becomes an essential part of the writing workshop. It is the place where the teacher can determine where each student is in their writing and help that student move forward.

When choosing writing as the focus of my study I knew the murky water in which I was about to wade. However, it is this same mysteriousness that makes writing interesting. Using mentor text is almost a natural extension of the writing workshop as the reading/writing connection is always right there, a tool to be utilized every day. There were several instances during a read aloud that I would stop and say, “Wow, listen to that again as a writer,” and then would read the section again. As a class we would stop and discuss these moments. Mentor text became such a seamless part of our writing and reading lives that it was difficult to capture all of these moments for my story.

First Days

At some point during the first few days of school I gather my students around me and have them sit on the multi-colored carpet in our classroom library. Shelves of books, many of them horse books that I have had since I was a student, rise up around us filled with their wondrous worlds, adventures and their mystic word magic. Giddy students embrace their brand new, marble composition books as I assign them their first homework task, decorate their writer’s notebooks to

honor themselves as writers. The idea of decorating their writer's notebooks comes from Lucy Calkins: *Units of Study for Teaching Writing, Grades 3-5*. I show them my own journal, covered in quotes cut out of magazines. In one picture a girl stands with her arms raised heavenward, the sun raining down on her. My journal celebrates me as a writer and I want them to decorate theirs with the same thoughtful care I put into mine. During this lesson I also read from *Writing Magic: Creating Stories That Fly*. In it Gail Levine (2006) gives writers seven rules for writers; to write, write, write and to read. "Most likely you don't need this rule," she says, "If you enjoy writing, you probably enjoy reading. The payoff for this pleasure is that reading books shows you how to write them" (p. 5).

Several days after our lesson in the library my students brought back their decorated journals. Many had taken the time to decorate these books with pictures of themselves, their friends, families, and pets. Moses covered his with stickers. There are students who remain under the radar, rarely get in trouble and then there are students whose name you know by lunch time on the first day of school. Moses was one of those kids. On his first day of school I asked Moses how he was doing, he'd missed the first three days of school and I'd not had a chance to talk to him prior. He responded, "I feel like a mouse, being chased by a cat in a haunted house."

I hesitated, not quite sure how to respond. His answer was creative, for sure. A snicker sounded in the back of the classroom. “What do you mean by that?” I asked, curious.

“Well, I didn’t know where my classroom was so I wandered around the school,” was his response. A writer’s imagination, I mused. He would be a character to follow.

Lehigh Valley Charter School is unique for many reasons. One is that our teachers loop up till grade four. The students in my classroom have only had two different teachers since kindergarten, unless they matriculated in a later grade. Since my students have had the same class and same teacher for two years prior to fourth grade, our first few weeks are all about adjustment. To get to know my students as writers I chose to administer a survey. I also assigned a base line writing piece. Our first unit of writing would be on narrative writing, so for this baseline assessment I had the students write about a summer experience. I wanted to be able to assess them as writers prior to the application of mentor text to see where or how they made the most improvement in their writing. I gave few directions so as not to alter their writing process and story ideas. Many students dove into their baseline writing with gusto, delighted to have a chance to share their stories. A few sort of stared blankly at the page, but soon also began to write. I wrote with them.

The baseline writing piece took a few class periods to complete and a few students required more time than others, but eventually they were all completed. With decorated notebooks in hand and the baseline assessment completed it was time to begin. Our first mini lesson? Brainstorming ideas, because *I don't know what to write about* is a plague in the writing workshop. Even professional authors will have writer's block, but in the writing workshop I believe that it comes from the students feeling that their stories don't matter and so I always begin by telling my class just how truly important their stories are. "Your stories are important, you are children but once." Then I read again from *Writing Magic*,

When you become a teenager, you step onto a bridge... The opposite side is adulthood. Childhood lies behind. The bridge is made of wood. As you cross, it burns behind you. If you save what you write, you still won't be able to cross back to childhood. But you'll be able to see yourself in that lost country. You'll be able to wave to yourself across that wide river.

It was during this first lesson that I told my students about my thesis inquiry. "Will we be in your paper?" one student asked, eyes wide, a broad smile plastered on his tiny face.

“Yes, you will be in my paper, if that’s alright,” I replied, delighted at this

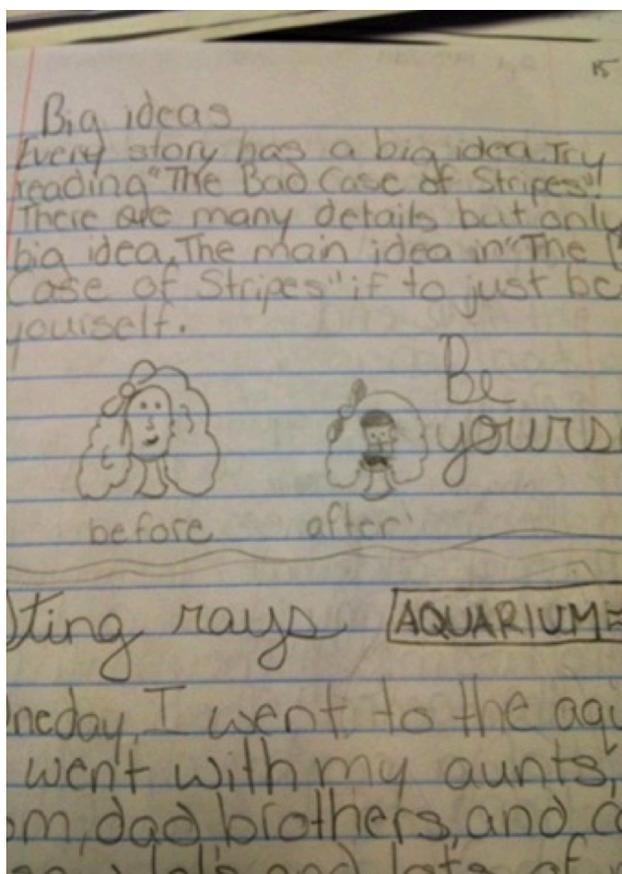


Figure 1: Notes from the lesson using *A Bad Case of Stripes*.

young friend’s enthusiasm. “We are going to learn how to write by looking at what professional authors do in their writing,” I explained, and then went on to tell them what a mentor text was. According to the surveys many students had never used another writer’s writing to help them write better nor had they ever heard the term mentor text.

Prewriting, Plot and *A Bad Case of Stripes*

I began my first lesson

using mentor text in September, about three weeks after the students had returned to school. We reviewed what a mentor text was and the reason why we were looking at how other authors write. This was followed by a lesson on the ideas trait found in *Trait Crate* by Ruth Culham (2007), which our school purchased just this year. The crate includes model lessons and a picture book to go with each of six traits: ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and

conventions. I began the lesson by introducing the “Ideas Trait” (Culham, 2007, p.3). Using the “Key Qualities of the Ideas Trait” overhead, I introduced how writers choose to write about things that matter to them. I explained that authors want to convey a message in their writing and so when they (the students) write they need to first choose a topic that is important to them. Then they need to ask themselves, “What do (I) want to say? What’s this all about?” (Culham, 2007) We discussed how authors write on a focused topic with original ideas.

I wanted to introduce the students to the idea that writers’ writing is usually focused around a theme, or a big message. So I placed the transparency “Big Ideas from Children’s Stories” on the overhead. There were children’s stories listed that

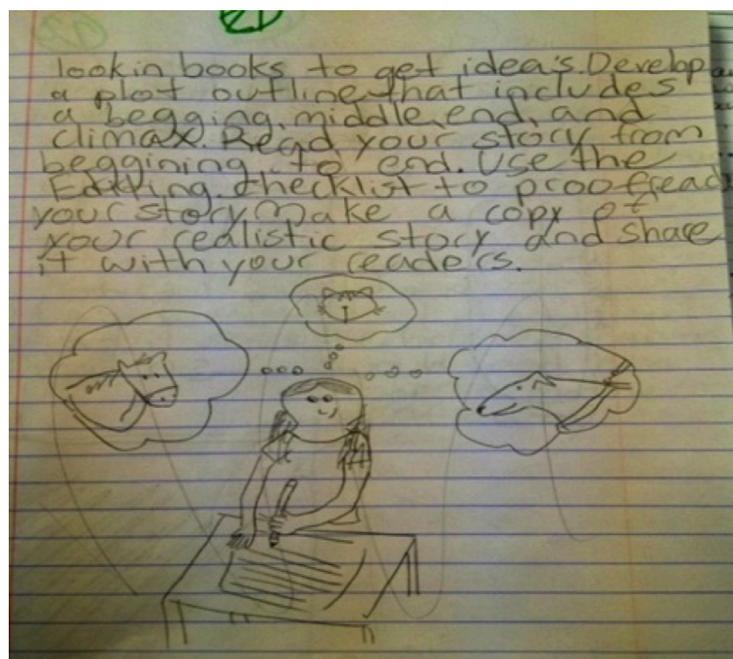


Figure 2: Lisa's notes from lesson and some of her ideas for what she might like to write about.

most students had heard before. We read together the details from each story listed to determine what the theme of the story was. The overhead had four options for each familiar story. Three were details and one was the message. To my dismay, though I'd modeled what I was looking for on the first story, several students chose details rather than the theme. Perhaps I had not been clear enough when I introduced the activity, I mused, or they may not know how to identify a theme in a story. I glanced around the classroom. I hadn't even known these students that well; however, two students were sitting slouched down in their seats, their knees propped on their desk. Lisa was drawing, Kevin lay on his desk with his head resting on his arms, and Sharon stared at her desk but I did not think she was really paying attention. I was deflated. My first lesson using a mentor text and I'd already lost them, or so I thought. I would find out later that some students weren't answering simply because they were busy taking notes.

"What is the message, or big idea, in the Three Little Pigs?" I asked Sharon since I wanted to keep her involved in the lesson.

She looked at the options on the board, "The wolf wants to eat the pigs." she replied. This was not the correct response.

Though slightly exasperated, I patiently replied, “Good try, however that is a detail in the story not the theme or message that the author is trying to convey.”

Another child raised his hand and identifies the correct answer, “Hard work pays off in the long run.”

“Yes,” I said, “a theme is the lesson that the author wants you to learn.

When we write we also want to have a theme or big idea that extends beyond our story with which people can connect.”

For our next lesson we reviewed the “Key qualities of the Ideas Trait” from the previous lesson and on the board I wrote, “authors set up

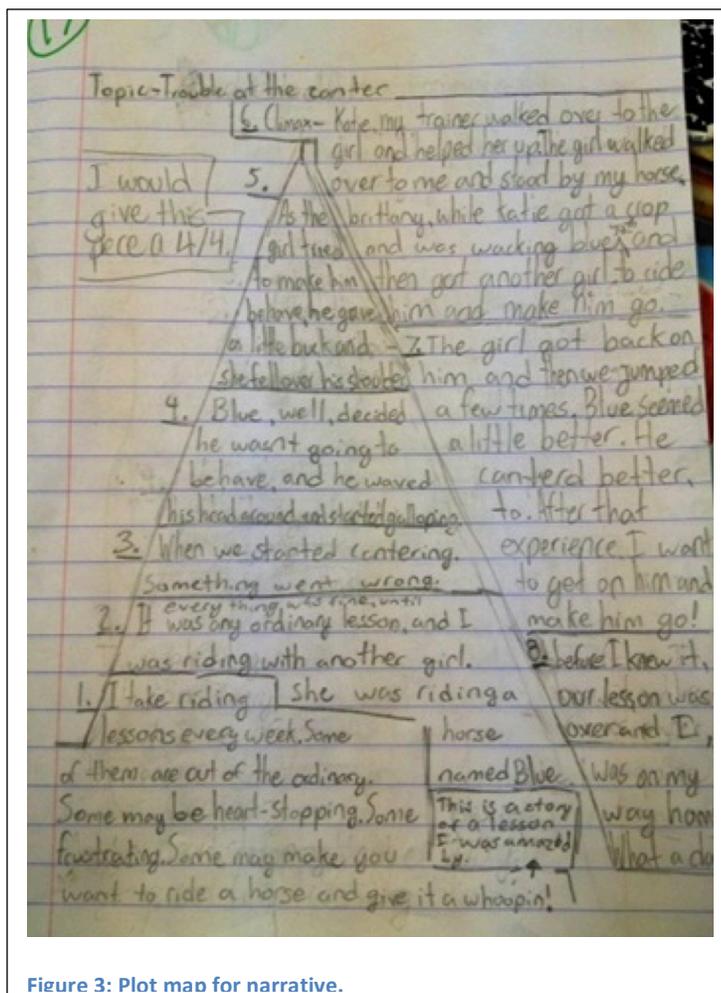


Figure 3: Plot map for narrative.

problems in stories and try to solve them. As the problem is solved, the reader develops an understanding of life” (Culham, p. 5). This is a huge concept for a fourth grader to understand let alone apply, but then maybe we underestimate the capabilities of our students. Though I assumed that most students wouldn’t hand in a bestselling work on their first try, I hoped, however, that they would at least begin to recognize how all of the story grammar we discuss in class is also what authors’ use to write their stories. I told students that their goal for the writing workshop would be to see how writers write a story with an idea of where their story will go, the problem that will be encountered in their story and how the problem will be solved.

I used the following metaphor to explain the importance of planning before they begin their stories. Writing, I explained is like a road trip. You could just get in the car and drive, and you might end up somewhere amazing; however, you will most likely just drive around for a while and finally realize you don’t know where you’re going. You need to begin somewhere, have a destination in mind and a rough idea of how you plan on getting there. Yes, you may still veer off course now and then to visit some random stop like *The World’s Biggest Ball of Yarn* but then you’ll get back in your car and keep driving toward your original destination. Your story is similar; you need to have a destination and a rough idea of what your story is going to look like. What problem will your character have, how will the problem be solved.

To model how writers write with a plot in mind we analyzed the plot in David Shannon's (1998), *A Bad Case of Stripes* using the plot graphic organizer. This mentor text was used because it had a message that was supported by the details in the story, a strong plot, as well as a clear problem and solution. When I introduced the story to my students I made sure that they were familiar with the book. Students easily identified the main character Camilla and the supporting characters, problem details and plot twists. John identified the theme in the story and the students seemed familiar with the idea of plot, although John did call out, "peak" instead of climax in the story. The students also recognized the problem and solution. As we completed the graphic organizer I began to recognize just how strong the reading/writing connection was. Here we were discussing story elements but this time we were sitting in the author's chair instead of the reader's. I didn't want my students to miss the enormity of the steps they were taking as writers so I made sure I discussed the connection. They seemed motivated by the use of mentor text and listened intently as I read.

Although I wanted students to begin working on their narratives, on this particular day I steered off the narrative path because I couldn't resist trying an activity. As I firmly believe that students need to be excited about the topic that they are writing about for it to be a genuinely authentic piece I rarely give students a writing prompt. Instead we spent time organizing various writing ideas, yet since I had not done this with my class yet, I daringly strolled off of my

normal path to try something a little different. After completing the prewriting graphic organizer for *A Bad Case of Stripes*, I wanted them to complete their own organizer to practice organizing their ideas for their narrative. I had students choose from a pile of character cards and problem cards. The characters and problems were funny and included situations such as, “A cowboy who is afraid of horses” (Culham, p. 13). The students seemed motivated by this activity and giggled as they chose their characters and their problems. Some students wanted to make up their own character and problem and so I permitted them to do this.

As I walked around the room I was excited by the work I saw. Students began filling out the graphic organizer immediately. Modeling how to fill out the graphic organizer with *A Bad Case of Stripes* really made the assignment clear and students seemed confident as they completed the activity. Brian, however, had not completed his organizer. He had a few sections, like the character and his own name written down, but nothing that had not already previously been given to him. I wasn't sure if he was actually stuck on the organizer, though. The other day he'd come to me with his math book and a stretchy book cover. He asked if I would put the cover on the book, but at the moment I was working with students so I'd asked if he had tried to put it on. He said he hadn't so I asked if he could try to put the cover on first and I'd help him if he had trouble. Instead of trying he sat in his chair holding the Lycra material in his hand crying and claiming that he couldn't do it. I knew that he could do it; I'd demonstrated to the class how to

bend the book cover back and slide the sleeve over top of both sides. So I gathered the class into the library for our weekly story, giving Brian a few minutes to try a go at the cover. Five minutes later Brian trotted over to the library, all smiles, his book covered. “I can’t do it” was becoming a frequent phrase from Brian and I was beginning to realize that when the going gets tough, Brian wants help. So when he sat at his desk with half of his paper incomplete I was admittedly frustrated; resistant writers are difficult. In writing, there isn’t a right or wrong answer. Writing comes from inside and I wanted Brian’s writing to come from him. There are no easy answers for students like Brian so I told him to look at the graphic organizer we’d completed in class and try to fill in the sections with events that he might like to have in his story. “The events will be the sequence in the story. What do you want to happen first, next, and after that?” He looked ready to write so I moved on to another table.

Ciserno Day

Sandra Ciserno is a word magician. When I read her short story, *Eleven*, I am teleported to my elementary school classroom. Chalk dust lingers in the air, I sit in an oversized desk with my perpetually too small leotards halfway to my knees. I become the eleven year old birthday girl in the story who has to stand up in front of her class to put on an ugly, smelly sweater that her teacher is convinced belongs to her. The sweater does not, however, belong to her and the embarrassment that runs up her neck as she pulls the itchy wool over her arms,

runs up the readers as well. It is my favorite text to share with my students. Due to a shortened week we didn't have our normal Monday reading schedule and since we were going to the zoo the following day, I wanted to plan a reading/writing lesson during our reading block. I chose to read *Eleven*, by Ciserno, because I wanted my students not only to recognize Ciserno's magic but also the beauty of a small moment story. I also wanted to make a connection between the small moment and the main idea in a story. My students had never read *Eleven* before though so I began by reading it first for the students to purely enjoy.

I asked my class to come to the library and once we were settled I began to read. The students listened quietly as I read aloud in my hoarse voice unable to add emphasis to my favorite parts. Reading aloud is a struggle for me as I frequently lose my voice, a point I should have considered when I chose mentor text as my thesis inquiry. After reading it a second time, this time for students to analyze, I asked one question, "what do you think the author did that was so amazing?"

Hands shot up and I called on John. He felt she gave good juicy details.

Jennifer pointed out, "It is about her life." Moses stated he thought she didn't want to be boring, while Brian recognized that she used lots of descriptive words.

Amanda realized something and raised her hand, “She makes us picture it in our head.”

Michael, being very practical pointed out, “She uses correct grammar and punctuation.”

Encouraged by their responses I queried further, “What did you like best about the way Ciserno wrote this story?”

“She is kind of looking at life from a different point of view,” John pointed out matter-of-factly.

“I liked when she put the sweater on and described it,” says Cage. His response is repeated by Amanda and Michael. This is also one of my own favorite moments in the story as well. The reader itches along with the character and we become empathetic to her plight.

“I like the cottage cheese part,” Moses states with a snort and a slightly devious grin.

Jennifer raised her hand, “When Phyllis said that sweater was hers.” I smile and turn to answer John again who states that he likes, the introduction with the ages.

Ciserno does it again, I mused as I asked the students to return to their desk as it was time to leave writing for the day.

Teacher as mentor

"We can help a person to be himself by our own willingness to steep ourselves temporarily in his world, in his private feelings and experiences. By our affirmation of the person as he is, we give him support and strength to take the next step in his own growth." Clark Moustakas

I sat in the middle of my students, my own notebook in hand, and began reading my own personal narrative about a birthday memory from third grade. I had written the piece last year after I had read Sandra Ciserno's *Eleven* to my class. The main character's birthday experience had helped me recall a similar melancholy birthday when I had been sent to the corner during a movie for talking. It is a piece I am proud of, a small moment story filled with sensory images and strong vocabulary words, a story with which students can relate. I wanted my students to know that I too am an unpolished author. I also want my students to recognize the value of their stories, though they may feel the moment was inconsequential. My story is not a grand adventure, but rather an embarrassing moment that forever remains ingrained in my mind. By sharing my story I hoped that my students would begin to hear the similar voice and tone that the reader can hear as they read Ciserno's story. I also chose to read this story to

help students generate a list of writing topics that they could potentially use to write their small moment story. After I was finished reading my story I began, “Today I want you to create a list of ideas you could write about for your personal narrative.” On the board I wrote four topics: people places, things and events then explained, “In a writing workshop we all learn from one another and one person’s idea may spark a connection in another, so I would like you to give me a few examples of topics that we could list under each of these headings.” Hands flew up and students began to give me several ideas that could go under the various topics. I took several of their suggestions and wrote them on the board.

“Now let’s think back to *A Bad Case of Stripes*. The story had a problem, a solution, a theme or big idea and the entire story was focused around one event. When you choose your topics you want to make sure you choose a topic that happens within a very short amount of time or one that is focused around a main idea, like Camilla’s illness in *A Bad Case of Stripes*. “

I wrote *My Day at Dorney Park* on the board. “This is not a manageable topic, it’s just too big and your story ends up being a list of events.” Underneath the first title I wrote, *The Time I Got Stuck on the Super Dooper Looper*. “This is a more manageable topic. You can paint a picture for your reader and write a story that will engage your reader, rather than writing a list of events. Now let’s take a few minutes to brainstorm ideas. It doesn’t matter what that idea is, just

write it down under one of the headings. Remember that everyone has stories worth telling.”

With that I sat down at an empty desk and began to write. The students sat around me writing as well, their heads bent thoughtfully. Some looked up at the ceiling but then would return to their writing. I reveled in this moment, as we all wrote together. After a few minutes I paused and asked the students to surface from their brainstorming. Sure, I knew that some students would have twenty ideas, while others might only have five; however, by sharing our ideas I hoped that students with only a few ideas would hear the ideas of others and have a memory triggered that they might want to write about.

“As we are sharing ideas, you may hear a story idea that triggers a memory that

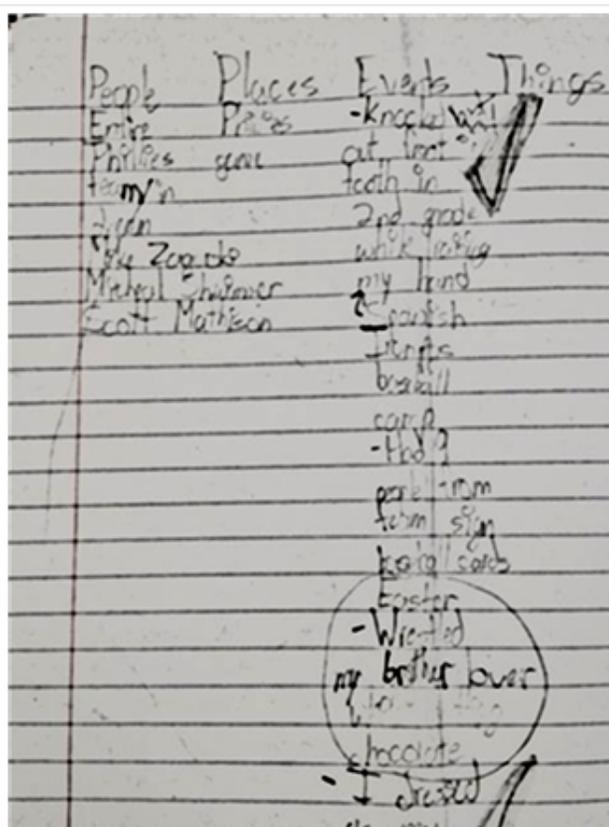


Figure 1: Sylvester's list of ideas.

you want to write about. Go ahead and write that down. Even if two people have a story about the same topic, your experiences and stories will be different.”

Students raised their hands and began excitedly sharing their ideas. I shared a few things I had written down as well, and even wrote down a few more ideas after hearing the students share their topics. It was at this moment that I began to notice something about my inquiry. I had been so nervous about finding the right books to use as mentors; however, something bigger was at work in my classroom. Though Ciserno had been our mentor author we were all working together mentoring one another as we shared ideas. It was one of those teaching moments that make you smile.

Writing Small Moments

Fourth graders have a world of stories they love to share; however, they love to share it all in a paragraph. They want you to know everything they did in the order they did it, without attention to the details that make a great story. After assessing the student’s summer stories I recognized that my students needed instruction on writing small moment stories. Although improving my students’ voices was my goal, they would first need to work on focus. In many of the baseline writing pieces I had assessed students had given a list of events that occurred over a day or even a week. Rather than showing their reader how scared they were as the roller coaster plummeted down the hill they told the reader that they had fun at Dorney Park.

Rather than reading a piece by a professional author and discussing what the author did well, we read a piece called *The Redwoods* that was written by an anonymous author. The story is the inverse of a well written mentor text and is unfocused, unclear, with no apparent author's purpose or audience. To be able to analyze the writing for focus I wanted the students to have a clear understanding of what focus is and what it is not. On the overhead we read together a definition of focus (Appendix D). I also showed the students a rubric so that they would know in advance what they should be looking for as they read the story.

I asked a student to read the story *The Redwoods* aloud. After we read we made a list on the board of what the author had not done well in the story. Though the author had a title the story ended up jumping from one topic to another with no clear focus. The students clearly recognized this lack of focus as well as the fact that though the title made you think he or she was going to discuss something about *The Redwoods*, he or she never once mentioned the trees in the writing.

I modeled how I would grade the essay and discussed why I would have given it a lower score because it lacked focus. I had the students practice scoring the writing as well and asked them to not only give the writing a score but to defend their choice. The students caught on quickly and used examples from the

rubric and the writing to defend their thoughts. Everyone agreed the writing was unfocused. Jennifer raised her hand. “Why do you feel it’s unfocused?” I asked.

“Because when it says, who is the intended audience she doesn’t really tell us about that and she doesn’t give us any details,” she replied.

George chimed in, “I think it’s a 1 because he doesn’t explain the details he has in there. Like it says he went hiking it doesn’t say where they were.”

“It doesn’t really have a point, the title was *The Redwoods* but he or she goes off course instead of focusing on the topic,” Derek chimes in, grinning from ear to ear with his never ending enthusiasm. After we read *The Redwoods* out loud I had a student read *Mouse Alert*. This is another piece I like to show students as it is antithetical to *The Redwoods*. This piece was written by an anonymous author about a crazy vacation to Yellowstone. The story is focused and well written. Instead of writing about the vacation this piece focuses on a small moment where a mouse appears in the author’s family’s cabin while they are on a vacation in Yellowstone. Again I had a student read the story out loud. After we read the paper we made a list on the board comparing the piece to the first story we had read. This story, we decided, stayed on topic, had a clear main idea, small moment story, was filled with details and had a strong introduction and conclusion. The groups then worked together discussing what grade they would give the second essay and why. The voice level suddenly dropped off and

I thought students were done till I realized they were writing the reasons they would give the paper the grade they chose. Of course my heart smiled at their enthusiasm. I gave them a second to use the rubric to tell me what they would give the paper and why and then asked them to respond.

“I would give it a 4 because he stays on topic and it is a clear paragraph. Also, he makes it so I can picture it in my head,” said Nathan even though the writing gives us no clues as to the gender of the author.

Evelyn didn't have her hand up but I chose her to speak. She is quiet and perhaps a bit shy but she always has great things to say. “I would give Mouse Alert a 4 because the story has a clear focus, it stayed on topic, and the author has an audience.”

Simon agreed, “I would give “Mouse Alert” a 4 because they stay on topic, an audience (is given), small moment, strong introduction, amazing details, and a main idea.”

Next I called on Jake because he's been raising his hand patiently for several minutes. “I give it a 4 because, it stays on topic and I also like it because it was about 3 paragraphs and they were good ones,” he said, pleased with his contribution.

I felt that this lesson went really well. The students were extremely engaged and seemed to grasp the idea that the rubric outlined what they as writers should be doing in their own writing. The students recognized the problems in the first piece and discussed how it was not as enjoyable to read. Colleen wrote the following in her writers' notebook, *I would give it (Mouse Hunt) a 4 because it has a clear focus and it doesn't jump all over the place going here and there. It makes me want to read more of that story. I would read it 1,000 times!* I was surprised that even Moses was engaged in the lesson. I asked him, "Why do we like this story better than the other one?"

To my wonder he responded, "This story stayed on topic and didn't

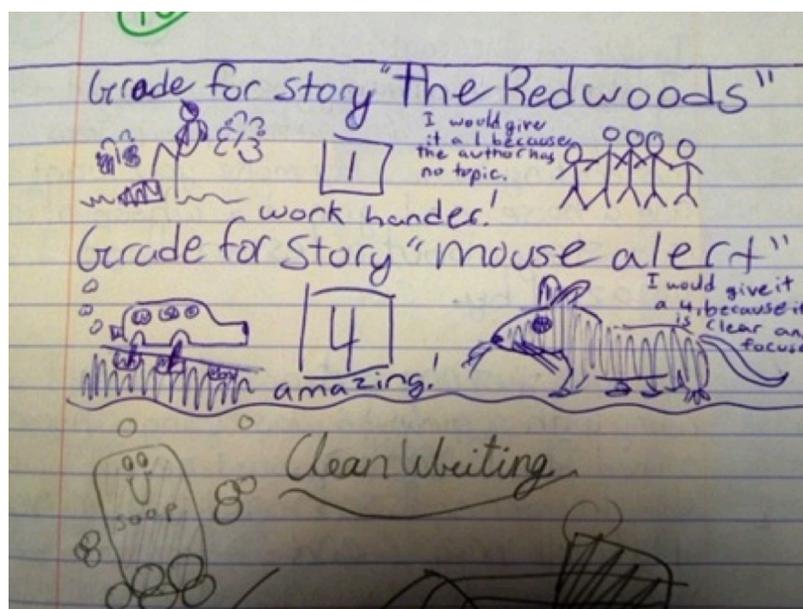


Figure 4: This student wrote support for the score she had chosen.

bounce around like the other story you showed us the other day.” I was flabbergasted. I often think that he’s not paying attention; perhaps he listens more than I think. When I had taught the lesson on main idea in writing and reading, the previous week, I had given the students a sample of a story that bounced around and a sample piece that had stayed on task. We discussed how the first had no main idea but the second sample did. I feel that using mentor text does not always mean using examples of what is perfect but also pieces that aren’t perfect. Students can learn just as much from others mistakes as they can from reading a professionally published piece. While this is not a mentor text if one defines mentor text as picture books (see p. 7), my students learned a valuable lesson about the domain of focus from these lessons that would help them recognize focus in well written text.

Conferencing

I walked through my room in another writing workshop writing my observations. Sharon and Kevin were chatting, Moses was mumbling, and Michael was working on his plot map. I stopped at Kevin’s desk.

“What’s your topic, Kevin?” I asked.

“Uh,”... silence. He picked up a pencil and started neatly drawing lines for his plot map. He hadn’t written anything and I sensed that he was

embarrassed as he smiled and sheepishly lowered his head. I was pretty sure he hadn't selected a topic so I left him alone and moved on to Brian.

“Brian, what are you writing about?”

“Can we fix our summer story,” he asked enthusiastically.

“Yes, you can. What part would you like to write about?” I asked.

“I wrote about my vacation, I want to change that.”

Confident that Brian would be beginning his plot map I returned to Kevin.

“Have you decided what you want to write about?”

“Me and my mom and my sister were at the store and we were buying supplies. We were going home and our car broke down.”

“That sounds scary,” I said.

“Yeah, my dad picked us up and the popsicles melted.” I smiled and Kevin went back to work on the plot for his story. I felt it was important for students to recognize that their stories should have a plot. They needed to recognize that authors write with a purpose and are organized.

As the students wrote, I watched them. Aaron kept making funny noises when he remembers something and flips between pages. I asked him to bring his notebook to the table with me so I could see what he was doing.

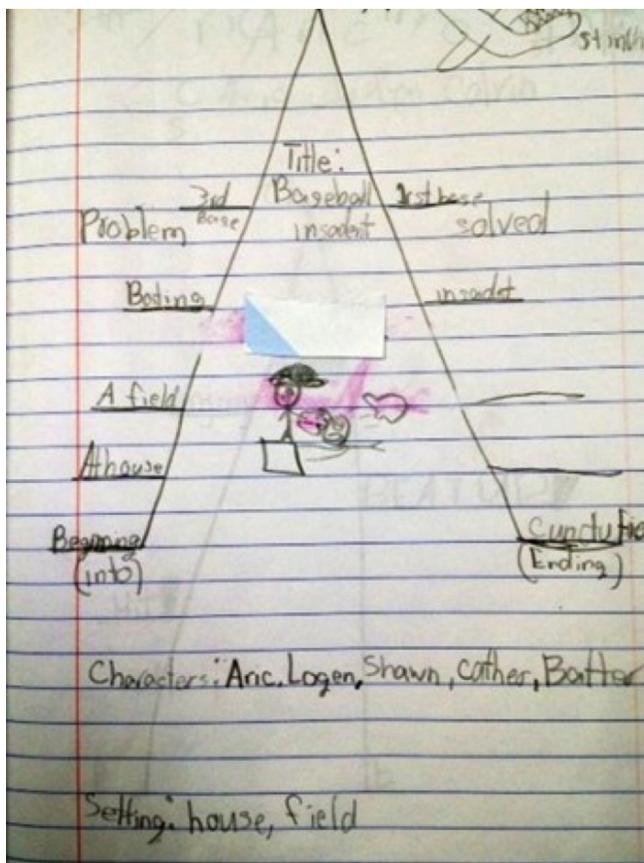


Figure 6: A plot map that Aaron created as a plan for his narrative. We used this to conference with before he began writing.

seat while I continued writing.

He showed me a completed plot map and then the beginnings of two other plot maps. I asked what he was going to be doing with those plot maps and he said he wasn't sure which story he wanted to write but that he was going to make three plot maps and then choose. I told him that was a really good idea and sent him back to his

Lori came over with her plot map. She was writing about a goal she had scored on her soccer game. The plot map was organized and included events that could be turned into small moments.

Both stories had strong plots. I attributed this to our lesson using *A Bad Case of Stripes*. We had dissected the story for plot and by doing so recognized how writers write with a big idea in mind and

plan their writing. I had also modeled how I would use a plot map to plan my own story. This had transferred to the students writing. I believe students were conscious of how mentor texts were helping them, but also feel that it was in combination with my own modeling that students made the connection between plot and planning for their story.

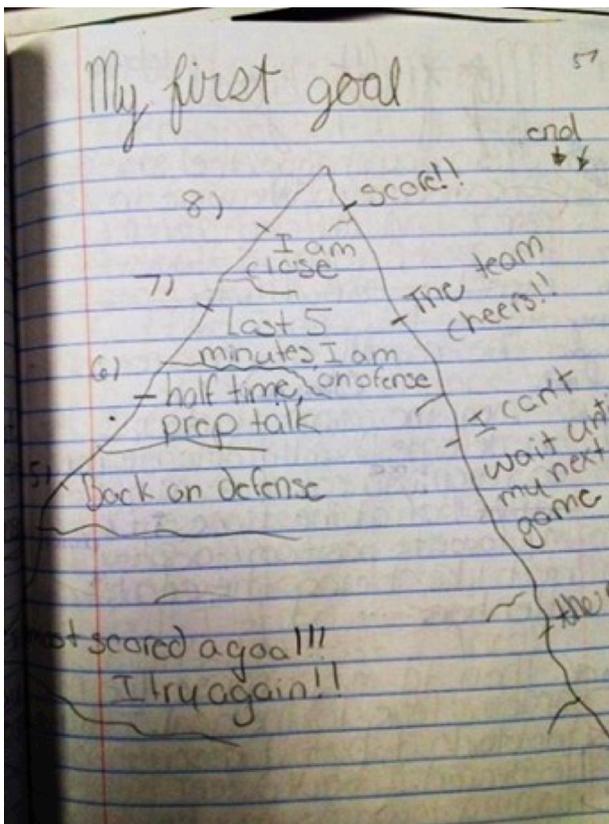


Figure 7: Lori's plot map for her narrative. Having the events organized helped her focus her story.

Jennifer's Lead

In a writing conference a few days after the students had made their plot maps, Jennifer came to me with the following lead for her personal narrative.

One weekend night, you won't believe what happened. Me and my mom sat down to have some Doritos. We'd not yet had a lesson on leads but I wanted to jump on this teachable moment and connect this to a mentor text.

“Why don't you find a few books and we can see what other authors have done in their writing to show rather than tell in their introduction.”

She brought me two books that she chose off the library shelf. “What are you trying to say?” I wondered hoping to guide her in her revision process.

“I'm trying to say how we both like Doritos and eat them every day.”

“Great, let's see how these authors wrote their introductions.” We read them together. “Take these back to your desk and try to write a lead that might sound a bit like one of these.” A few minutes later she returned with her notebook and two more leads. The first read, *here I was opening my bag of Doritos when pop the burst of flavor came out into my face.* The second lead read, *I reached across the table as I was craving those crunchy, tasty, delicious Doritos. Me and my mom smiled when the smell of Doritos hit our noses.* “Did you use either of the books you had brought to me to help you,” I'd asked. She said that she had actually used a different book that she had in her desk and had

read the introduction to see what the author had done in her writing. Either way, I was excited that she had used a mentor text to help her write the introduction and in her revisions you could hear her voice and better understand the setting of the story.

One may wonder how these young students know not to copy another authors writing. From the beginning of my study I had discussed plagiarism with my class. When introducing mentor texts I explained that we were not using them to copy from but rather as a model. They were to observe the authors craft and then apply that to their own stories. My students seemed to understand this as I did not find evidence of copying. I feel, based on my own interpretation, that many students want to tell their own story and if their writing is valued that this perhaps is the reason they do not copy when using mentor text.

Mentors and Mentor Text

When a second grade teacher mentioned that she would like my class to come help her students revise and edit their writing I was both excited and skeptical. I was excited to have my students have a chance to revise and edit another's writing as I felt it might make them aware of their own mistakes and the problems these mistakes cause in their writing. At the same time skepticism crept in as I pondered if we were ready to revise and edit with another class. In preparation, the week before we went to the second grade class we discussed the

difference between revising and editing. I discussed how authors spend time revising and how they have other people read their writing as well.

I shared the story of a friend of mine who was writing her first book. She spent months revising and editing. She gave her book to several people who she felt would give her good feedback, then she took their advice and made several changes. Revising, I told them, is like making pottery. You begin with a blob of clay and then mold and mold and mold. Sometimes you don't have to mold as much cause things go well. Other times you have to mush it all back down and start all over.

Still the morning that we were to visit the second grade classroom I was a little anxious. Though we'd discussed revising and editing, a lot of our writing time had been stolen by assessments and assemblies in the weeks prior to visiting second grade. I wasn't sure if they would know quite what to do. So as I stood in front of the room to prepare my students for the morning's task I decided I would try something. "Today we are going to another classroom to read their writing and help them review, revise and edit. I want you to take a pen, a pack of post-it notes (we revise with post-it notes so that we don't have to keep rewriting), your writer's notebook and a mentor text of your choice. Just as I have used mentor text to show you how professional authors write I want you to try using a mentor text to show our young friends what they can try in their own writing.

“Remember”, I said, “you are also a mentor so you can use what you have done in your own writing to help them.”

The students gathered their materials and we walked to the second grade room. The second grade teacher matched each of her second grade authors with a fourth grade partner and the students found a spot together where they began working immediately. As I walked around the room many of my students were helping their young writing partners edit rather than revise but I was content to see them apply the grammar and spelling skills we had been discussing in class such as capitalization and end punctuation. However, some students really embraced their new role as editor and so I was delighted when I saw Lori bring out her book report book *Charlotte's Web* to show how the author had written her introduction. I had conferenced with Lori the previous week and together we had worked on the introduction to her narrative by looking at the introductions in a few other books. She had revised her introduction and the current introduction was dramatically improved over the previous. My heart smiled as I saw her now doing the same as this young friend's editor.

John also had a book with him, *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. He showed his young friend how the author used dialogue in the book. Although their attempts to use mentor text to revise and edit were not yet fluid, the fact that they attempted to use them as models for other writers led me to believe that they

found this strategy helpful. I wasn't certain, however, if they would have thought to use a mentor text had I not asked them to take a book with them. I decided to interview a few students to find if they felt it was helpful and if they would use mentor text to peer conference as well.

After we returned to our classroom I chatted with Lori and asked her about using a mentor text with her partner she replied, "Her introduction was "*Once upon a time*" and I wanted to help her come up with a better introduction so I read her the introduction from *Charlotte's Web*. I told her that you want to have an introduction that interests your reader." She showed me the section of text she had showed her young friend.

"Did she make any changes?" I asked.

Lori shook her head yes and smiled, "I told her to do that."

Whether her young friend made changes or not, I felt that the experience was important for Lori as well as her partner. The second grade teacher reported to me that her students had a new passion for writing after our visit and wanted us to come again before they published. I'd begun the year thinking I would only be studying the effects of mentor text on my students' writing; however, this was growing into something much bigger. Not only had my students actually become mentors themselves, but a writing community was beginning to develop. Rather

than having isolated experiences in our own classroom, my students were now sharing the impact that mentor text had on them with others. Another thing dawned on me as I watched the conferences; the students had obviously learned this behavior somewhere as they were comfortable sitting alongside of their younger peers and discussing writing. They were mimicking their experiences conferencing with me and perhaps the teachers that they'd conferenced with prior to coming to my classroom. Though I'd recognized it before, the idea was becoming stronger. Writing is about mentoring. Mentor texts make sense because mentoring in writing and education in general makes sense.

Checking in

Curious to find out how my students felt about the use of mentor text I asked Evelyn during a conference, "does it help to look at what other authors do?"

"Yeah," she responded bashfully. Evelyn is shy and hesitant to answer my questions specifically but her writing is fantastic. She writes with a maturity that is beyond her years. Her craft is something I may be able to help her contour but could never teach.

"Where do you think your writing ability comes from?" I asked.

"Definitely reading," she said with a smile. Of course I am thrilled by her comment. Her statement confirmed my belief that reading is integral in becoming a good writer. It's difficult to prove that just by me reading aloud a book that a

student will magically become a better writer; however, Evelyn's writing has progressed. She started off well and her writing just keeps getting better with every lesson and conference. Interestingly, Evelyn is not always a willing reader and while she does read during independent reading in class she does not read as often at home. However, her comprehension is very good. There seemed to be some evidence that my students who were avid readers were also making progress more quickly than my students who were not.

I decided that evening to copy some of my students work. As I sat in the copier room, focusing in the fluorescence on their prewrites, first drafts and revisions of their narrative I was overwhelmingly delighted by what I saw. I began to recognize something that I'd begun to see over the last few weeks. It is prudent to reflect on the various elements of a writing workshop that produce a final product. While I still feel that my students were benefiting greatly from the use of mentor text I started recognizing the other factors associated with a writing workshop that greatly impacted a student's writing. Writing instruction is not a one size fits all. Mini-lessons, grammar instruction, peer revising and editing all impact how a student writes. Without one piece of the workshop puzzle a final piece would be incomplete and a learning opportunity missed for a student. For instance, I felt I had taught an awesome lesson that day but part of the impact of that lesson started the week prior when I was teaching reading. I recognized that my students were struggling with visualizing and that they did not fully

understand how to use sensory images to help make a picture in their mind. Their writing also lacked detail and they were struggling to draw the reader into their writing piece. So I began planning my writing lesson on sensory images which I knew would also be used for my yearly observation.

Time

Mentor text was proving to be a powerful tool in the writing workshop, but as I sat planning several days later, for a lesson on using mentor text to teach writing introductions, I began to recognize one small issue with using mentor text; time. I was going to need to go to the library to locate several books that I found in a lesson on teaching introductions. Though I have a growing library I did not have many of the books I needed for the lesson ideas I had found. I would love to have the many books I felt would be valuable at my disposal but buying all of the books would be incredibly expensive. I know that any piece of writing can be used as a mentor text, however, some are, in my opinion, better than others. With all of the demands placed on teachers, planning is allotted only a certain amount of time so when I found lesson ideas with a mentor text suggestion I preferred using the suggestion rather than searching for another book that would be useful for teaching specific traits. Off to the library I went, certain that I would also incur late fees but eager to gather my materials.

Owl Moon

“What are your five senses?” I asked, beginning my lesson on using sensory images to help the reader visualize. Our principal was coming for an observed lesson and so I had previously written my lesson out so I wouldn’t forget anything. “Today we are going to investigate another writing trait, word choice and sensory images. Word Choice refers to the language a writer chooses to express his or her ideas. Effective words are both clear and colorful, the more precise the word, the clearer the meaning. *Tree* is not as precise, for instance, as *redwood*. Listen to this example, what do you see when I read this: *Towering redwoods continued their seemingly endless climb into forever, and I wished myself a hawk, perched on the tip of this giant’s fingers, viewing the world from such a noble height?*” (Fletcher, 2002, p.62)

The students were eager to answer, and many recognized that the giant’s fingers were tree branches. They also recognized that their climb into forever was a metaphor for the fact that the trees were so tall they seemed to touch the sky. “Sensory images ‘paint pictures’ in your reader’s mind (visualization),” I told my students (Spandel, 2002, p.67). I asked them to listen to the words of Ralph Fletcher who says, “You might think of the five senses as nets to catch the world. Good writers use these five senses – sight, touch, smell, taste, sound – to bring the world of their stories to their readers” (Fletcher 2007, p. 62). I then explained that

I would play *Owl Moon* on CD and asked them to pay attention to which of the five senses the author uses in the writing.

I played the CD of *Owl Moon* by Jane Yolen. The CD lured us into a world of snow with a small round boy bouncing quietly behind his father on a late night, winter adventure. The reader's intonation along with the music was riveting and helped us visualize. The lesson I realized, had several facets. As a writer it was small moment story, full of figurative language and imagery. I only hoped that my students would recognize the magic of the author's craft.

After reading the story I reread parts of the book and asked the students to investigate the book with me for examples of words and phrases that could help us as readers to visualize and create sensory images. We discussed each page and collected examples of sensory images then showed the pictures of the book on the ELMO after we'd discussed the images. I passed out *Painting Word Pictures* from the "Write Traits: Student Book," had the students read *Mud Fights* by Jocelyn Noonan and then had them complete the *sensory reaction* chart at the bottom of the page.

After reading *Mud Fights* I passed out a picture book to each table along a copy of the handout *Write Like...*, both from the *Write Traits Student Trait book* by Spandel and Hicks (2002) for each student and instructed students to read the book together and then find sensory words that helped them visualize. The lesson went really well, as far as I was concerned. The students were engaged

and participated frequently. They listened to the story and were able to identify imagery in the text that helped the reader visualize.

After the lesson I gave my students opportunities to revise their narratives and other writing pieces to include figurative language. I conferenced with students to help them identify areas where they could add imagery and as they revised and the writing they brought to me demonstrated their application of the skill.

Godzilla

Derek kicks the ball and runs from base to base like a tiny bolt of lightning. His tooth filled smile fills his tiny face. His tiny frame seems even smaller as he runs past some of the taller fourth graders. He exudes energy and his joy is contagious. Speaking a second language at home, however, he struggles in the writing classroom.

Early in the year he bounced over to the table for his first conference. We had begun our narratives and he had already made a plot map about playing a video game with a friend of his. He had a problem and solution, a solid plot outline, characters, purpose and main idea. I was so excited to see that he had applied everything that I had taught using *A Bad Case of Stripes*. Though his writing included all the ingredients of a great writing piece, it bounced around and his writing was like soup lacking the spice that would make it oh so good. His introduction began with, “*One fine day, well one hard day, I had to wake up so*

early.” While I recognized that Derek was using mentor text here, my desire was to see my students step outside of the box and write something with a little more flare and gusto so I had him find a mentor text of his choice and we looked at the introduction together. After we read the mentor text I modeled for him how to write with strong verbs to paint a picture for the reader and asked him to model what I had done. Strong verbs were not the focus of my lesson that day, yet it’s what his writing needed. Pondering what to do I modeled for him how to use strong verbs and sensory images to draw out his voice and catch his reader. I wrote the following piece about my horse, Oswald, in his writing journal.

Oswald’s white blaze glowed under the lights of the stadium as we trotted through the in-gate. His chestnut coat glistened from hours of brushing. I nervously nodded to the judges as I squeezed my legs against Ozzie’s sides.

We discussed how this introduction was different than telling the reader that I rode Oz into the ring and then we jumped the fences and then I won a ribbon. The latter example is what I explained was “telling” the reader rather than, “showing.” While I cannot take credit for this language, I have heard it and used it so many times over the last few years that I cannot say where it originally came from.

We went back to the introduction and found the strong verbs. “These strong verbs” I explained, “show more than adjectives.”

Derek seemed doubtful at first so I told him, “take this back to your desk and read what I wrote and write something that sounds like that.”

“Oh, ok” he said and in his usual fervor, jumped out of his seat like a spring and hopped to his desk where he began to write. After a minute or two he appeared at my writing table again asking, “is this right.” These words make me cringe, I do not want my students to feel like there is a right answer in writing, however, I could tell that he needed affirmation and crossed my fingers wondering what I might find. In his notebook, he had written, *Godzillas light green scales light up the room on his back are Dark plates.* On the top of another page he had written, *Godzillas light green scales make my room glow. Godzillas dark spikes are like silver diamonds. He has skin that is like, tire rubber.* While the grammar was slightly erroneous, I was blown away with his connection and revisions. “Derek,” I exclaimed, too loudly as most of the class looked my way, “it’s amazing.” His

smile could have lit up a dark room.

This seemingly insignificant moment became a breakthrough in

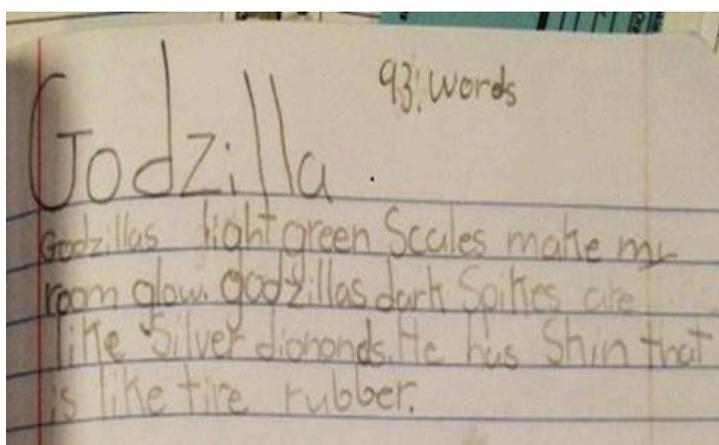


Figure 8: Derek's revised introduction.

Derek's writing. It was not a professionally written mentor text that had impacted Derek it was that of his own teacher. This reiterated my belief that mentor writers do not have to be only published authors. They can be teacher writers or student writers. Again, mentoring was becoming a powerful force in the room.

A Visit from Fifth Grade

After visiting second grade with my writers to help revise their writing, I had an epiphany. I had seen my writers use their own writing and that of professional mentors to help second grade improve their writing. In turn the second grade class had become ravenous in their writing and had been motivated by my young writers. I wanted another class to do the same for mine and knew just the class. Sue is my TA from last year. She was familiar with the idea of using mentor text and worked side by side with me to revise and edit my students' writing. This year she is teaching fifth grade, and as such, has several of my students from last year. I had piloted my study last year by using mentor text in writing so Sue's students were comfortable with the language I use and know my expectations for student writing. So I asked Sue if our classes could work together. Both classes were excited about the pending visit. One of the fifth graders even wrote an entry in their monthly newsletter about the visit.

Upon their arrival I randomly paired a fifth grader with one or two of my students. Just as my students had taken post-its, pens, their own writer's notebooks and mentor text to revise and edit with second grade, so Sue's class did

when they came to my classroom. Students found comfortable places around the room. Some sat on individual carpets with their partners, others sat at the kidney table, a few had taken over the library and the remaining groups sat at desks. The murmuring voices of engaged writers and editors filled the room as a piano in an orchestra. Students used mentor text to show how to write introductions or how to use strong verbs. Other students expertly discussed focus and small moments. They wrote ideas on post-it notes and guiding questions in the margins of the papers. Sue came over to me and said, “It’s great that they are speaking the same language,” and I couldn’t agree more. The fifth graders were validating what I have said in the classroom and my students seemed to understand even more the importance of their task as writers as these students mentored them in their writing.

Later I asked Athena how she felt about fifth grades visit. “What did you talk about in your conference?” I asked her.

“He helped me with my punctuation and helped me when to start another story, like when I start another story it won’t be boring.”

“Do you mean she helped you with your introduction?”

“Yeah, introductions,” she replied.

“What did he do show you?”

“He showed me one of his books from the beginning and I got some ideas for the story I was writing.” Her partner had brought mentor text with him and since Sue was teaching writing with mentor text, her partner had done the same in his conference with Athena.

“What ideas?” I asked.

“He told me to write ‘*AH*’ because I had a really bad dream. The book he used, I forgot what it was called, it helped me by giving more good details for when I write another story.”

“What was your favorite part when the fifth graders came?” I asked, excited that the fifth grade partner had used mentor text with my student.

“When he was checking over my work to make sure it makes sense.”

“How are you going to write introductions now,” I pried further.

“First I’m going to plan my writing out so I know what to write. I’m going to write a paragraph,”

“How will your new introduction be different from your others?”

“It’s different because it only stays on one topic and the other one had so many topics that I was talking about.”

In talking to Athena I noticed that she has a difficult time being specific in her verbal communication. When I asked her questions she took a long time to verbalize her answer. She did not use the language that I would expect her to use, such as *introduction* which she called *start*. Though her writing had progressed, her progress had been slower than I would expect. I expect that like her verbal communication, she lacked the vocabulary to express how she feels and thinks in her writing. Still, I am glad that she felt that conferencing with the fifth graders was beneficial.

Introductions

Do I begin this paragraph with a statement, *Writing introductions is hard for young writers*. Or should I begin with the setting, *students sit quietly staring at their papers. A few begin to write and erase, while others ignore my request to revise their introductions and plow through to the next task?* I could begin by sharing observations, or perhaps I could complain a bit about a lesson gone awry. I had already typed and deleted my own introduction about five times and was prepared to put the computer down and forgo writing my own story introduction to take a nap or find a snack. It was about the time I was ready to bail on my task that I realized that I myself was struggling with writing introductions.

They are tricky things, those introductions. You can never have a second chance to make a first impression, so the saying goes. This is why I chose to present my students with a lesson that would offer them examples of various

introductions and then discuss how they too can write a good introduction for their writing piece.

I had prepared what I considered a great lesson. Using mentor text I would show the students eight types of introductions some of which were questions, dialogue, setting, and traditional introductions which begin *Once upon a time*. I made a copies of various types of introductions so students would have examples of the introductions in front of them. The original copy would be shown on the ELMO and we were going to create a list on butcher paper, of the various types of introductions we would be discussing.

I began by sharing the importance of a good beginning, “There is no right or wrong lead but a good writer spends time writing a good beginning. It’s like the author reaches through the page, grabs the readers shirt and says, ‘*this is gonna be good.*’ I am going to show you several kinds of introductions that you may want to try in your writing, but first I am going to read a lead I would like you to listen to.”

I read the following example from the book *Wilma Unlimited*, recommended in Ralph Fletcher’s (2007) book on craft lessons as an example of a good lead.

No one expected such a tiny girl to have a first birthday. In Clarksville, Tennessee, in 1940, life for a baby who weighed just over four pounds at birth was sure to be limited.

But most babies didn't have nineteen older brothers and sisters to watch over them. Most babies didn't have a mother who knew home remedies and a father who worked several jobs.

Most babies weren't Wilma Rudolph. (Krull, 1996, p. 1)

After reading the lead from Wilma Unlimited I read a second example of a lead that the author could have written but didn't. "*Wilma Rudolph fought against all odds to become the first American woman to win three gold medals in an Olympic competition*" (Fletcher, 2007, p. 77). I explained that many students write leads such as this summary lead and they give everything away in the first sentence.

I moved on from these examples to the packet, "Here is another form of introduction," the students had a copy of the introduction with them but I had placed the book under the ELMO so they could see the colored copy. "*I could, if I wanted, tell Mama and Papa I won't go. I won't go, I'll say, to a new house, to the new place, to a land I've never seen*" (MacLachlan, 1995, p.2). "What sorts of questions does this lead evoke?" I asked after reading, expecting student hands

to fly into the air....crickets. Not one student raised his or her hand. I tried to rephrase it with no takers. I called on Derek, who seemed to be looking in my direction and he began to answer but I knew immediately he was not grasping

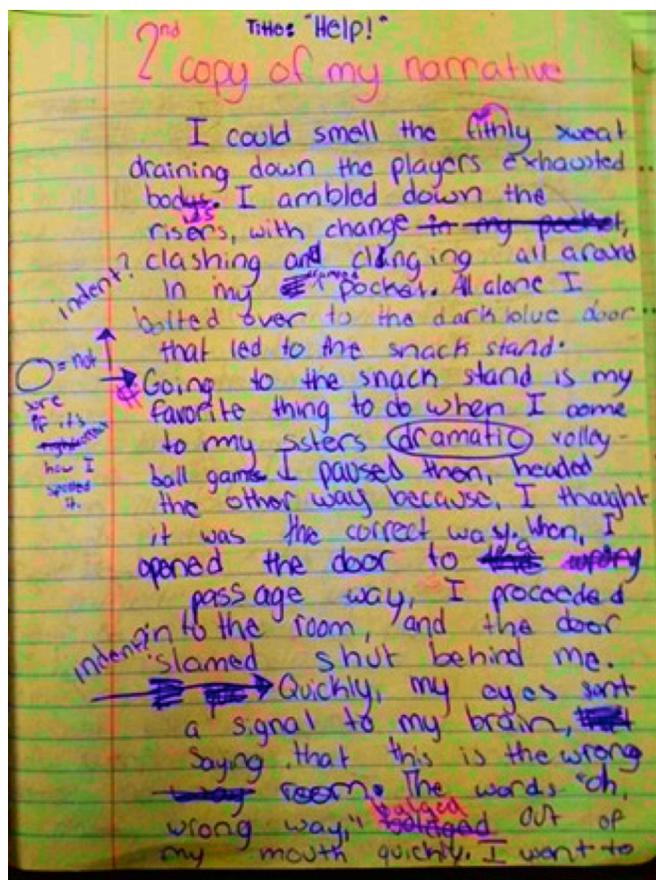


Figure 9: Evelyn revised her introduction after our conference. This new introduction used imagery and vivid verbs.

what I was asking. After spending hours preparing this lesson even going to the library to pick out the exact books that had been recommended in the lesson, this lesson was quickly going downhill. Jennifer saved the day by finally raising her hand, “I would want to know why her family had to move.”

“Awesome,” I

answered, relieved as other students followed her lead

by also raising their hands. Other students asked, “Where is the character going?”

“Why doesn’t the character want to leave?” “Why do they have to move?” These

questions were wonderful and demonstrate the power of a well-crafted lead.

“You can write a lead like this as well,” I said.

After giving students time to revise their introductions I began conferencing with them to see what kind of changes they had made. Evelyn was one of the first students I called. Her original introduction was, *I walked down the steps off the risers with a pocket full of money.* Her revised introduction was amazing. *I could smell the filthy sweat draining down the players exhausted bodies. I ambled down the risers, with change clashing and clinking all around in my pocket. All alone I bolted over to the dark blue door that led to the snack stand.* The figurative language, voice, vivid verbs all oozed from the revisions. It is in these moments that I have to take a step back and wonder at the true talent of my students.

Reality in the classroom

October brought a menagerie of interruptions. First my students earned a “Rock Party” for good behavior and had our party on a Friday. I’d spent hours planning what I deemed amazing lessons for the week that included a lesson on vivid verbs using mentor text and making magnetic poetry to build vocabulary but as I sat in my classroom that Friday having accomplished little of my original plan I felt deflated.

On the Monday following we incurred a snow day from a freak October nor'easter that left the city of Bethlehem powerless and looking oddly post-apocalyptic. Tuesday served us a dish of chaos from the unexpected snowstorm, Halloween and the arrival of a new student and as one can imagine little was accomplished. On Wednesday I came down with a stomach flu that kept me home from work for two days and rendered me somewhat brainless for Friday. My plans were thrown to the side for Wednesday as I was too sick to write intelligible plans that the substitute could reenact. However, by Wednesday night I was beginning to become aware that I would not be able to return to school on Thursday either so I did have my substitute conference with my students.

Eventually, life returned to normal and we resumed our writing routine. We started our poetry unit, while continuing our narrative revisions. The students were also in the final stages of their unit writing piece about an animal they had created. I wanted to revisit revisions because I knew that this was a challenge for many of my students and, though I had already taught a lesson on leads, many students were still finding this difficult. So I wrote the following lead on the board. *I was walking through the rainforest and I saw the scariest thing ever, I call it the Flannigator.* I explained to the students that this was similar to the leads they had written.

Under this lead I made up a revised lead on the spot and wrote the following on the board, *I might tell you that the animal I discovered is as sweet and cuddly like a kitten, however, that would be a lie. With teeth as sharp as razors and claws that can cut diamonds, the animal I now call the Flannigator poised to pounce. The heat of blood rushed through my neck but paralyzed by panic I just stared. It growled showing it's razor sharp teeth and scratched at the air with its diamond cutting claws.*

We discussed which lead we liked better and why. I also pointed out that when I revised my lead I

didn't just look up a word or two in the thesaurus, I really changed my lead to grab my reader. "Writers do this over and over again." I had told them. I then had my students return to their writing to work on revising their leads for their animal writing piece. Sharon came to my table for a conference

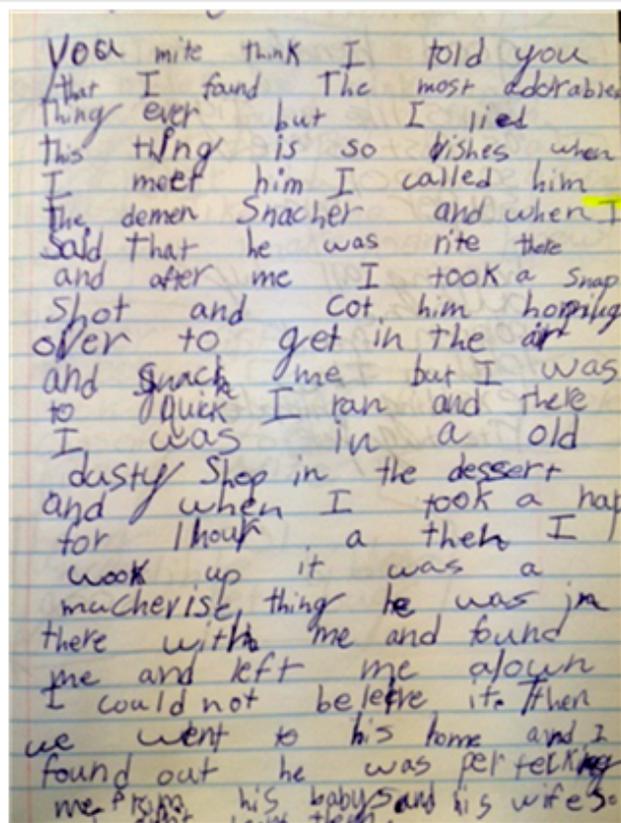


Figure 10: Sharon's revised lead using borrowed voice.

first. She struggles with reading comprehension and with writing. I lose her frequently in a large group but she is responsive when I work with her one on one. Her lead read very similar to the one that I had written on the board. *“You might think I’m going to tell you that this animal I discovered is the cutest animal in the world but that is a lie. This animal is vicious and evil. He uses his claws for snatching his prey. The time I saw it I called it the vishesnater.”*

“Your lead is wonderful. Did my lead help you?” I’d asked. Though I do not necessarily want students to copy what other authors have done, I did not mind that Sharon had borrowed what I wrote. Having a mentor or model is invaluable for her as she needs to see the structure to be able to create her own lead. Her lead, though it is very similar to mine is the “borrowed voice” that Shanahan discusses in his study. The rest of her story still needed work and though I did give her something to work on as she left my table I wished for more time.

Vanessa, like Sharon, made tremendous leaps in our conferences, but struggles to write independently. She struggles even more with revising; however, upon reading her journal I found that she too had borrowed the voice in the lead I had written. She wrote, *You might think this animal is cute so to tell you it’s not so don’t so is you think it’s cute I would change my mind about that*

*teeth so sharp like aligators (alligators) teeth and claws so sharp like a Bears
Colaw (claw) so when I first saw it I felt like I was going to fant (faint)...*

With a borrowed voice Vanessa had independently revised her original introduction. Vanessa struggles with spelling and grammar. In her introduction she had not used punctuation and many words were spelled incorrectly; however I was excited that she had written a paragraph and as I walked away from her desk I again recognized the power of the mentor approach to writing.

While I am proud of the accomplishments of both student authors the problem remains that this is not yet something they are capable of doing independently. I will have to continue to bring them back to this moment whenever we write introductions and perhaps again model writing introductions before they are able to write without borrowing another author's voice. However, I believe with persistence and patience that both students will be able to do this independently in the future.

Realizations

By the beginning of November I had envisioned my students writing engaging small moment stories with charming introductions and well-crafted prose. The reality was that while some students were making progress on their narratives and their craft as writers, others were not. Vanessa had not requested a single conference, and so I had been the one to invite her to conference with me

several times through her narrative process. I again invited her to conference with me and while what she had written for her narrative was actually quite engaging, it was still one large paragraph. She'd created a plot map, and had a first draft, but she seemed to have hit a wall with her story. I found a spot that she could elaborate on and modeled for her how I would revise that section by using strong verbs and figurative language. I recalled the lesson with *Owl Moon* and how the author used figurative language to paint a picture for the reader. She had written, *It all started when I was jumping on my bed doing flips I wanted to try it on my moms bed so I did but it didn't work out to well.* "What if you slowed down this moment and really exploded it for the reader, like Ciserno did in her story?" I asked. Her revised draft was amazing. Not only had she revised the section I spoke to her about but had also revised her introduction to mirror one of the introductions we'd had looked at in a mentor text. *I screamed,* were the first two words in her introduction. Fantastic! The reader would be hooked. The section I spoke to her about was also revised and mirrored ideas we had discussed in her conference.

Cage came for a conference next. He had written a revised introduction; however, his new introduction included unnecessary information. I asked him what helped him revise his narrative and he replied that he had brainstormed and used a thesaurus to change his word choice. I told him to focus on the details that matter and to take another look at his narrative. Though respectful I could sense

he was not eager to make my suggested revisions. I find that many students are eager to write a first draft and hand it in. The tedious work of revising, revising and then finally editing is something they are not accustomed to. I reiterate in every conference that this is how professional authors write. They are always revising and even when they submit their work they probably wish they could still make changes.

Kevin's conference followed Cage's conference. In his base line assessment Kevin had written about his day at Dorney Park. The story ended up being 9 pages long and told all about his day. While his endurance in writing was delighting and I could tell that he was excited about his story, there were few moments where he painted scenes for the writer. The first draft of his narrative had been similar to the summer story though not as long. I found that though the moment he was writing about was much smaller than in his baseline assessment, he still wrote more or less a list of events rather than telling a story that his reader could touch or feel. He had created a plot map like the one I had modeled in my lesson and had included a problem, solution, setting, list of events and climax; so his organization was strong but his voice was missing. His first draft read, "*One day me and my mom and my brother and sister went to the store to buy some groceries and I ask my mom if I can get the box of popsickle and she said yes. The popsickle had colors of the flag red white and blue.*"

In our first conference I had told Kevin that he had a great story idea, I had loved his plot map and was excited about the way he had described the popsicles. However, I explained to him that I wanted him to show the reader his experience rather than telling them about his day. “Write so that I feel like I was there too,” I’d said.

His second draft of his story came shortly after our lesson on sensory images and after the lesson using mentor text on introductions. He wrote the following in his journal:

One hot sunny morning my mom asked me if I would go with her to the store and I said yes. I knew it would be a really hot day because I saw my mom wearing her favorite pink tank top that matches her shorts. Then after that we went to the car.

“I love this part,” I said pointing to the part where he wrote about his mom’s tank top. This draft was already completely different from his first draft. Although he still had plenty of work to do on his narrative, this moment showed me that something was working. He had used sensory images and had slowed down the moment in his story.

“Can I see your writing piece on your animal?” I’d asked. He found the writing in his journal and showed it to me. Having recently worked on

introductions I decided we'd focus on his revision of his introduction in this piece. He had written, "*I am so excited to have discovered the chickasaurus rex.*" He was having a trouble revising his lead so I decided I that we would work on this in our conference. "Remember all of the imagery in *Owl Moon*?" I'd asked. "The author wrote the story so we could feel the cold and hear the dogs and trains singing out in the crisp night. We are going to do that, so close your eyes," I told him, "and tell me about your animal's biome.

What do you see?
 What's happening in this scene?" As he described the scene I scribed for him, asking guiding questions to extricate more detail.

"I see yellow grass and trees," he said.

"Are the trees green and gnarly," I asked smiling. He

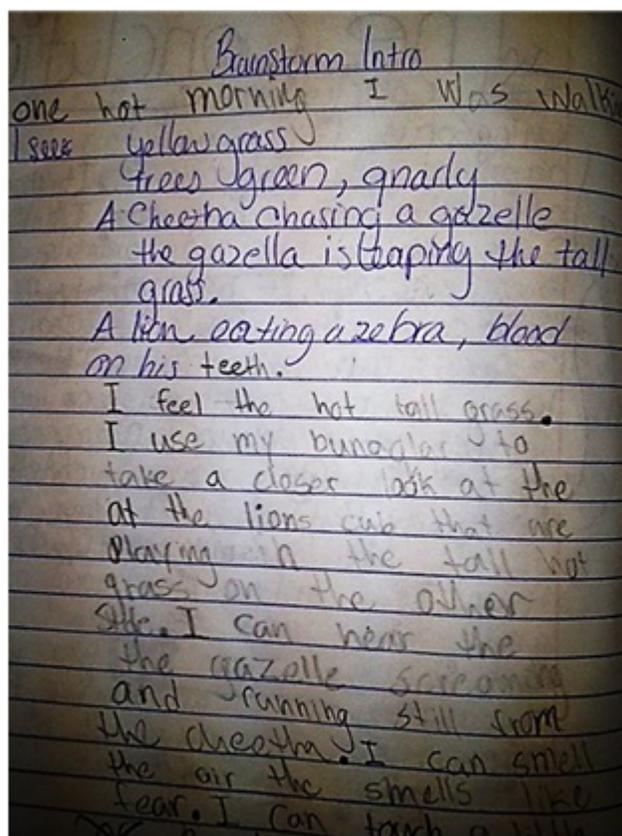


Figure 11: This shows where I scribed for Kevin as he explained what he saw on the plains. The picture shows where I stopped scribing and he began writing on his own. This was not for our narrative piece.

looked at me with a smirk, “gnarly means all twisted and knotty,” I’d explained.

“Yes,” he’d said.

“What else do you see?” I’d queried.

“A cheetah chasing a gazelle, the gazelle is leaping through the tall grass.”

“Good start, look at how the reader can see the scene you are talking about. Now you try,” I said, handing him his notebook. He took it and began writing. Though I continued conferencing with other students I had him stay at the table because, though he doesn’t always distract others, Kevin easily distracts himself. He had a goal now and I wanted him to continue working. He looked up a few minutes later and handed me his notebook, it read.

I feel the hot tall grass. I use my bunaqlar (binoculars) to take a closer look at the lion cub(s) that are playing in the tall hot grass on the other side. I can hear the gazelle screaming and running still from the cheeta. I can smell the air that smells like fear.

“Wow, Kevin, this is wonderful! I love the part where you said the air smells like fear. How fantastic!” The smile that spread across his face lit up the room.

Mentor text, while a valuable strategy for modeling writing, is for naught if it is not followed up with meaningful conferences. Kevin could not have written his piece alone. Cage would have left his introduction unedited. Vanessa would have turned in a paragraph and Moses probably would have handed in nothing. The writing workshop is all about mentoring. Students mentor students, teachers mentor students, mentor texts mentor students and many times students mentor teachers. The writing workshop is a living breathing animal that is at times difficult to control. However, with patience and persistence something magical can transcend.

Finishing up

After several weeks of writing, revising and writing, revising again followed by conferencing and editing my students were nearing their final drafts. Some students completed their story and had worked ahead, asking if they could type their story. I was, of course, more than willing to oblige their request. Meanwhile, about three students were still struggling to write more than a large paragraph.

I continued to conference with these students and finally all narratives were submitted. It was December when we finished, a long time to work on the same story, but the end result was fantastic and the students had learned several vital lessons. Revision is king in the writing classroom and I hoped that by applying my mini lessons using mentor text to revise different pieces of their

narrative, they would recognize the value. My students revised their writing so often throughout the course of my study. While they initially relied on mentor text as they revised, their writing became more and more their own. This happened naturally without instruction from me to do so.

The reading/writing connection became a seamless part of our daily lives. My students still do not always make connections independently between writing plot and reading for plot, but once I help them make these connections they understand. I am proud of their growth as writers and feel that they are much more confident in their writing skills.

A survey given at the end of my study proved interesting and confirmed something that I had recognized more and more throughout my study. Mentor texts work. They are an effective strategy in the writing classroom but without daily conferencing they cannot be as effective. On the survey I asked if what helped their writing the most. One student said, "I think the thing that mostly improved my work was using the mentor text." Another student wrote that using mentor text helped as did the plot map because it helped them remember not to skip anything and another wrote, "I think mentor text improved my writing so I can sound like an author." However, it seemed that conferencing, whether with me or other students, was also an incredibly important part of our story. "What helped me the most is a peer conference because I know what the reader wants me

EXPLANATION OF DATA SURVEY

Survey data

I began my study by having students complete a survey to better understand my students as writers. Another survey was administered at the end of the study as well to better understand how the students felt about mentor text and the mentoring process.

My initial survey demonstrated that only 10 of the students surveyed had ever felt that they were authors. For the question, *Are there any books by a certain author that have helped you with your writing?* Only eight students said yes. Three students said it was to help them with vocabulary while two others said they were inspired by other authors.

My culminating survey became the most enlightening piece of data that I collected. The survey had 18 questions. Several were multiple-choice but there were also open ended questions. The responses were anonymous and 22 out of 23 students completed the survey. The survey showed that seventy-two percent of the students felt that mentor texts helped them choose an appropriate topic while four percent disagreed. Seventy-three percent agreed that mentor text helped them focus their writing while twenty-seven percent were neutral. No one disagreed.

Interestingly, fifty-nine percent either agreed or strongly agreed that mentor text helped improve their voice, while thirty-one percent were neutral, five percent disagreed and another five percent strongly disagreed.

The majority of the class, ninety percent, agreed or strongly agreed that the use of mentor text helped them improve their introductions.

As my study progressed I recognized the tremendous importance of the teacher as facilitator, model and mentor in the writing workshop. On the survey ninety-five percent either strongly agreed or agreed that conferencing with the teacher had helped their writing.

The open ended section shed further light on this as students stated that, “it (conferencing with the teacher) helped because when I have to revise my work than when I am done revising it makes my writing better.” Another student wrote, “I think that conferencing with a teacher helps me with my writing because they give us good ideas about what we should write and what our voice should be like in our writing.”

When students were given the chance to rank various approaches to teaching writing sixty-seven percent of the students said that the use of mentor text to teach writing was kind of helpful and twenty-nine percent stated it was very helpful. However, ninety-five percent of the class stated that conferencing

with the teacher was very helpful and eighty-one percent rated teacher modeling as very helpful. This has led me to believe that while mentor text is helpful, conferencing with the teacher and modeling is the most important component of the writing workshop.

Table 1. The following table represents the assessment results for the baseline narrative. There were 22 students who submitted their baseline assessment.

| Baseline Assessment |  |  |  |
|---------------------|---|---|---|
| Ideas | 1 | 11 | 12 |
| Organization | 2 | 10 | 10 |
| Voice | 2 | 12 | 8 |
| Word Choice | 1 | 17 | 4 |

Table 2. This table represents the students' scores at the end of my study. The students were assessed using the same rubric used to assess the baseline narrative. The students revised their narrative throughout the trimester after mini -lessons using mentor text. Both the baseline and the revised narratives were assessed using the same rubric.

| Final Narrative |  |  |  |
|-----------------|---|---|---|
| Ideas | 14 | 6 | 2 |
| Organization | 12 | 9 | 1 |
| Voice | 14 | 6 | 2 |
| Word Choice | 14 | 8 | 0 |

Table 3. The following table shows the results of the survey given at the end of my study. There were 18 questions; nine of them asked students if they strongly agreed, agreed, were neutral, disagreed or strongly disagreed about a statement regarding a part of the writing process.

| Survey | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|--|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| Mentor text helped students choose an appropriate topic. | 27% | 45% | 23% | 5% | 0 |
| Mentor text improved student focus. | 9% | 64% | 27% | 0 | 0 |
| Mentor text improved student voice. | 32% | 27% | 32% | 5% | 5% |
| Mentor text helped students write better introductions. | 64% | 27% | 5% | 5% | 0 |
| Students understand plot better after mini-lesson and creating one in their story. | 43% | 33% | 24% | 0 | 0 |
| Spend time revising. | 55% | 27% | 14% | 0 | 5% |
| Found revising and editing with classmates to be helpful. | 55% | 32% | 14% | 0 | 0 |
| Felt that conferencing with the teacher helped their writing. | 71% | 24% | 0 | 5% | 0 |
| Felt more like an author now than in the beginning of the year. | 65% | 25% | 10% | 0 | 0 |

Table 4. The following table represents four other questions that were asked on the survey that required a yes or no answer.

| | Yes | No |
|---|-----|-----|
| I have used a mentor text to help me prewrite my narrative. | 62% | 38% |
| I have used a mentor text to help me write my narrative. | 95% | 5% |
| I have used a mentor text to help me revise my narrative. | 48% | 53% |
| I have used a mentor text to help me edit my narrative. | 43% | 57% |

Table 5. I asked students to rank the various elements of the writing workshop that were most helpful to them in writing their narrative. They were able to give one, two or three stars for each. The following table shows their responses.

| | 1 Star | 2 Stars | 3 Stars |
|---------------------------------|--------|---------|---------|
| Mentor Text | 5% | 67% | 29% |
| Peer Conferencing | 5% | 33% | 62% |
| Teacher Conference | 0% | 5% | 95% |
| Conferencing with second grade. | 15% | 50% | 35% |
| Conferencing with fifth grade. | 5% | 38% | 57% |
| Mini lessons in class | 5% | 38% | 57% |
| Teacher modeling | 0% | 19% | 81% |

My Field Log

My field log, which held my observations and conversations with students, helped me identify the following themes:

The strategy of using mentor text to model skills in mini lessons does improve students' writing but teachers need to make explicit connections, model skills, and then encourage the use of mentor text for this strategy to be successful.

Any piece of writing can be used as a mentor text to improve student writing. Well written examples model the writer's craft, poor examples allow students to experience the frustrations their readers feel. The teacher's writing, students' writing or professionally written pieces can all be used as mentor text.

Through observation I have come to feel that with teacher as mentor to model and scaffold the writing process, students will improve their writing craft. I also recognized that by conferencing with one another in the writing workshop students are able to mentor one another, use mentor text in helping one another revise, and practice their skills as editors.

Student Work

The student baseline writing sample provided an opportunity for me to know where to begin my instruction. It guided my choices for mentor texts and acted as a reference point for conferencing with students. The narrative assessed at the culmination of my study provided evidence that showed growth throughout the class in the six writing domains. Most notably I feel that my students' voice improved tremendously throughout the semester. I identified areas where students used elements that had been discussed in mini-lessons and through analyzing drafts and final drafts I was able to identify that students did use the writing process, and frequently borrowed the voice of others.

Conferences, Interviews and Participant Checks

My conferences with students, interviews and check-ins gave me tremendous insight into how students felt throughout my study. It also offered me the opportunity to get to know my students and their individual needs. Through

my conversations and interviews with students I recognized that the most influential element in the writing workshop is conferencing with the teacher and teacher modeling. However, I also identified that students did frequently borrow my voice or the voice found in mentor text to write their stories.

Conferencing took center stage in the writing workshop and while the focus of my study continued to be the use of mentor text to improve writing, if not for conferencing the degree to which my students writing improved would not have occurred. Students confirmed my belief that using mentor text in addition to conferencing, mentoring and modeling students' writing will improve.

Mentor texts are a wonderful tool to use in the writing classroom. However, I now recognize the important role the teacher has a model and mentor to make mentor text effective. It seems that as my students moved through the writing process that they independently stepped away from the use of mentor text to complete their writing without my encouragement, while a few others still rely on mentor texts, as well as my coaching, to write a finished piece.

Figure 12: Coding bins demonstrating themes that arose throughout the study.



THEMES

Throughout my study I began to recognize themes that were confirmed through my literature research, field log data, and feedback from students through dialogue and surveys.

- *The strategy of using mentor text to model skills in mini lessons does improve students' writing but teachers need to make explicit connections, model skills, and then encourage the use of mentor text for this strategy to be successful.*
- *The most influential element on students writing in the writing workshop is conferencing with the teacher. As the teacher models and scaffolds the writing process in a one on one conference, students will improve their craft as writers. However, some students may become overly dependent on the teacher.*
- *Through conferencing with one another in the writing workshop students are able to mentor one another, use mentor text in helping one another revise, and practice their skills as editors.*
- *The teacher is also a mentor.*
- *Some students will require more support and conferencing to support the use of the mentor text. Some students may not use the writing process or apply writer's craft gleaned from mentor texts independently.*

Research Findings

- *The strategy of using mentor text to model skills in mini lessons does improve student writing but teachers need to make explicit connections, model skills, and then encourage the use of mentor text for this strategy to be successful.*

Dorfman & Capelli (2007) state that mentor texts become a partner to the teacher and a model that students can imitate as they write. As writers read and learn to imitate professional authors, they also begin to envision the writer that they can become (p. 2). From the beginning of my study I found this statement to be true. *A Bad Case of Stripes* was used numerous times throughout my study, first in my mini lesson and then in conversations during conferences or as examples in mini-lessons. Ciserno's *Eleven* became a relied on mentor text last year and this year was already like an old comfortable friend. I modeled for the students how I borrowed Ciserno's voice in a story that I had read and I frequently recalled the piece to discuss strong verbs, imagery and writing small moments.

During the writing workshop students began to use mentor texts independently and would proudly announce that they had used a mentor text to help them write a specific part of their story. John did this often. I would catch him looking at me to make sure that I knew that he was using a book during the writing workshop, and if I hadn't seen, he would make sure I knew when he came

for a conference. Lori also used mentor text independently in her own writing and during conferencing. However, not all of my students were so easily won over. Brian, Nathan, Athena and Amanda were just a few that did not instinctively use a mentor text. They would listen during a read-aloud but would not seek out a mentor text on their own.

In student writing I found evidence that students had borrowed the voice of the writers I had used as mentors. I found the most evidence of students using mentor text in their introductions. In the lesson on introductions several different kinds of introductions were modeled through mentor text and had students revised their narrative introduction using one of the mentor texts that were read. Many of their new introductions were wonderful and mirrored the style of writing of the author they had modeled. My findings were supported by my post study survey as ninety-one percent of my students agreed or strongly agreed that mentor text had helped them write their introductions.

While the use of mentor text is a successful strategy and students may begin to choose books to help them write their stories independently, students will not necessarily recognize the teacher's intended skill without the specification of exactly what they would like their students to gain from a specific text. "It turns out that this magical essence is not so simple to extract. And once extracted it doesn't transfer easily to the student who reads it" (Fletcher, 2011, p. 4). As teachers use mentor texts they need to model and scaffold how to find the magic

that professional authors do. When using *A Bad Case of Stripes* I wanted my students to recognize that writers write with a big idea (or theme) in mind. I also used the same book to teach them how writers prewrite and how they could plan their story using a plot map. I modeled for the students how to make the plot map using *A Bad Case of Stripes* and many took notes then used these skills to write their stories. During conferences I checked the students plot maps and was able to determine what students needed further scaffolding. If needed I modeled further or asked questions to elicit more information which we then wrote on their plot map. Many students now use these skills independently and plan their writing using plot maps without teacher instruction. While some still need teacher prompting to plan their writing they do use the writing process once prompted to do so.

I asked students questions on my survey to identify the areas mentor text were the most helpful. I asked students if they felt that using mentor text to choose an appropriate topic, which we discussed in the lesson on big ideas using *A Bad Case of Stripes*, was helpful. The results were that twenty-seven percent strongly agreed, while forty-five percent agreed that this was helpful. Only nine percent of the students surveyed strongly agreed that mentor text helped them improve their focus while sixty-three percent agreed. Another thirty-two percent were neutral while 5% disagreed and another 5% strongly disagreed.

I believe that students did not necessarily recognize that their focus was drastically improved after the lesson on focus and writing small moment stories. Also, while I still considered *The Redwoods* and *Mouse Alert* to be mentor text they may not have recognized or remembered that I had categorized them as such. Student writing became much more focused after this lesson and students were more comfortable reading a rubric as a result as well.

I felt that mentor text did help students improve their voice. The survey showed that thirty-two percent strongly agreed and twenty-seven percent agreed that this was helpful.

Notably, sixty-three percent of students strongly agreed and another twenty-seven percent agreed that using mentor text helped them write better introductions in their stories. Forty-three percent of students strongly agreed and another thirty-three percent agreed that using mentor text helped them write their plot maps and plan their stories. One student stated, “**using mentor text helped me a lot, the plot map because it helped me to keep track of where I was writing and I didn’t skip anything.**”

Students were also asked when they used mentor text in the writing process. Sixty-two percent of my students stated that they used mentor text to prewrite, ninety-five percent stated that they had used mentor text to help them write (draft) their narrative. However, after drafting students were less apt to use

mentor text as forty-seven percent stated that they used mentor text to revise, and forty-two percent used mentor text to edit. I feel that students may not have rated mentor text as highly for revising and editing because they relied more on conferences. In conferences I did encourage students to return to a mentor text or would find one to help them. Other times, however, I would write with them and they borrowed my voice instead of returning to a mentor text.

In the open ended section of the survey students identified how mentor texts were helpful.

*“The thing that helped me in my writing is using
mentor text and sensory details.”*

*“Reading books had improved my writing because I
could see what the authors write so I could do better.”*

- *While mentor text is a successful strategy the most influential element on students writing in the writing workshop is conferencing with the teacher. As the teacher models and scaffolds the writing process in a one on one conference, students will improve their craft as writers.*

It was in my writing conferences that my instruction and intuition was validated. I had an opportunity in these conferences to dialogue with my students about their writing. I loved to hear what they wanted to work on and celebrate their accomplishments. Of course, watching their growth as writers was also mind blowing. There is not a rubric or other assessment tool that is capable of measuring a student's voice and style, their effort or their pride better than a one-on-one conference. Freire (1970) agrees, "Only through communication can human life hold meaning" (p. 77). This statement encapsulates the importance of a writing conference. Vygotsky (1978) also supports the importance of conferencing as he points out, "Over a decade even the profoundest thinkers never questioned the assumption; they never entertained the notion that what children can do with the assistance of others might be in some sense even more indicative of their mental development than what they can do alone" (Vygotsky, p.85).

My field log, observations, survey and student work all support that the teacher is the critical component in the writing workshop. While teachers obviously need to plan and teach mini-lessons, it is during the writing conference

that students grow the most. When students came to me with their writing we would read it together and discuss what they wanted to work on in their conference. The use of a self-evaluation/peer conferencing sheet streamlined the process and students came to the conference with at least two specific areas on which they wanted to work.

During these conferences teachers are able to differentiate their instruction to meet the individual needs of each writer, something that is unable to be accomplished in a whole group lesson. The teacher also builds a relationship with his or her writers, which helps to cultivate a safe writing workshop. I wanted my writers to be successful and so in a conference I was able to discuss how they could improve their voice or introduction. I modeled how to use a mentor text to meet their specific need and then would be able to identify their growth in a follow-up conference.

While sitting with my students one week I explained that I wanted to know what I was doing that was most influential in their writing. They were sure to mention mentor texts, however, they knew that this was the topic of my study. It was their comments regarding conferences that really caught my attention. Lori said, “when I conference with you I can go back and write better.” This is what I began to recognize more and more as my study has progressed. Yes, the mentor texts help, but not without the one on one instruction and modeling that occur in a writing conference.

Vygotsky (1978) believes that what a child produces with assistance is more indicative of their capabilities than the work they produce without assistance. Educators need to find what students can do alone and then through scaffolding in conferences, challenge them to go beyond their individual limits to reach a higher standard rather than just teaching students skills that they are already capable of mastering. Vygotsky (1978) also says, “Children can imitate a variety of actions that go well beyond the limits of their own capabilities. Using imitation, children are capable of doing much more in collective activity or under the guidance of adults (pg. 88). There were several examples mentioned in my story, where students made remarkable progress after meeting with me in a conference.

In my survey ninety-five percent of my students agreed or strongly agreed that conferencing with the teacher helped their writing and ninety-five percent gave conferencing with a teacher three stars as the most helpful in writing their narrative.

During conferences and in mini-lessons I would also model for students how to revise their writing. Sometimes I did this using a mentor text, while other times I did this using my own writing. I actually found more specific evidence of students borrowing my voice and writing than specific evidence of students borrowing the voice of mentor text. I believe this is because students were using

their own mentor texts as they wrote and therefore I was not always able to connect their borrowed voice to a specific piece of writing. Vanessa and Sharon both use my introduction to revise their introductions and Derek also used my writing to revise his writing. In my survey eighty-one percent of my students gave teacher modeling three stars.

The following are anonymous student quotes derived from my survey

regarding teacher conferencing and modeling:
 Figure 2.15. Quotes from student surveys.



What helped me improve my narrative the most was when I conferenced with the teacher. Instead of her telling me to just change little things like spelling, she really helps me get started and helps me

By analyzing student scores ~~with my revisions~~ baseline narrative and their

completed narrative also confirmed the benefit of using mentor text. The baseline assessment was assessed using the same rubric as the one used to assess the narrative which they wrote throughout the semester. I had given no instructions on how the baseline narrative should be written other than asking them to write about a story from their summer. I did not encourage the students to use the writing process on this narrative and few did. Instead many wrote a draft and then a final copy. Less than half of the class spent any time pre-writing.

On the second narrative, which I collected at the end of my study, students used the writing process throughout. They made plot maps, drafted, revised after each mini-lesson, during writing blocks and after conferences. These narratives were focused stories, based on small moments rather than days after just the first lesson using mentor text.

While ninety-five percent of students received a check or minus indicating that their writing was satisfactory or below satisfactory on the baseline assessment., fifty-six percent received a plus (or 3 out of 3) on the second narrative and only two students received any minuses (below satisfactory).

- *Through conferencing with one another in the writing workshop students are able to mentor one another, use mentor text in helping one another revise, and practice their skills as editors. In doing so a community of writing mentors was developed.*

Teacher conferences were not the only conference that students reported was beneficial. My students also reported that they felt that peer conferencing was another element of the writing workshop that improved their writing. Giving up control to the students may frighten some teachers but it is a critical part of the writing process. By reading one another's work and having discussions students are able to imitate one another's process, word choice, voice or writing style. They were also able to practice imitating the teacher by giving feedback.

Mentors, I found, weren't just in the professionally written text. We mentored one another in conferences. My students conferenced with one another forming relationships and improving their writing craft by applying what we had

learned in mini-lessons. Additionally, a community of writers with a shared language began to arise as we conferenced with second and fifth grade. Our school community caught on and other teachers are using mentor text and conferencing with other classes as well.

Student comments were also helpful in recognizing this important theme. One student wrote,

The best thing that helped me with my writing is peer conferencing. That helped me because my friends help me fix things and they would help me add things. My friends give me really great tips and it helps me a lot. My friends also say where I could get a better grade. We both look at the rubric and think to ourselves how we could do better. I really like peer conferencing.

Other students wrote,

Peer conferencing has helped me a lot. It has helped me to understand what other people think about my stories instead of just my own opinions.

One time fifth grade came and helped us revise or unit assessment. It helped me not write things that didn't make sense.

*What helped me improve my writing the most was
when I checked other kids writing.*

In my own classroom, students benefited from opportunities to conference with one another. In the survey sixty-five percent strongly agreed that peer conferencing was helpful to them as they wrote their narrative and an additional twenty-five percent agreed with this statement. On the ratings section of the survey it was rated as the third most helpful element in the writing workshop behind teacher conferencing and modeling. Conferencing with fifth grade was rated three stars by fifty-seven percent of students and given two stars by another thirty-seven percent. This was followed by conferencing with second grade, which received three stars from thirty-five percent of the students and two stars by fifty percent of the class. While I felt that conferencing was beneficial for my students as writers, I can understand why they would find this to be the least helpful in their narrative writing. They are not cognitive of the benefits of practicing their writing craft by revising and using mentor text with younger students. Also, many did not return to their own writing and make revisions based on this experience. This experience was more beneficial for the second

grade writers whom which we conferenced. Still I believe there were many benefits for my writers and the school as a whole as our visit helped to build a writing community and shared language.

- *Teacher as mentor*

As my study progressed it became clear that the teacher is a mentor in the writing workshop. The teacher is first a model for his or her students as he or she is a model reader and a model writer. As I conferenced with my students and wrote with them, students returned to their desks and borrowing my voice were able to revise their writing, often returning with a fabulous revisions and elaborations. I believe this is because as I conference with my writers I am able to diversify my instruction to meet their immediate need and as I demonstrate writing for them I become the mentor.

One student stated in the survey that one of the most helpful things in the writing workshop was when, **“the teacher told us stories about what happened in her life so I thought about what happened in my life.”**

When I taught the lesson on finding ideas for writing I had used mentor text but then I shared various topics that I wanted to write about; I then allowed students to share their topics. By doing so, students were able to hear other ideas that triggered memories of their own which they could write about.

Another student wrote, “*what helped me was to not tell and to show and to use strong verbs to improve my writing.*” I had modeled for how to show their reader what was happening rather than telling the reader. I then focused on this in conferences. By modeling and conferencing I was able to nurture my writers and help my students grow, rather than just assigning grades. Students rated mini-lessons highly as fifty-seven percent of students gave mini-lessons three stars and thirty-eight gave mini-lessons thirty-eight stars. However, the teacher as mentor was rated higher than any other element in the writing workshop.

Teachers also become mentors for the writing workshop as they model for students how to conference in their own one on one conferences, which in turn improves peer conferences as students are more aware of what a conference should look like.

Vygotsky (1978) supports the importance of teachers as mentors as he states,

Indeed, can it be doubted that children learn speech from adults or that, through asking questions and giving answers, children acquire a variety of information or that through imitating adults and through being instructed about how to act, children develop an entire repository of skills? (pg. 84)

This quote indeed directly supports this theme as it is stating that through imitation students learn. They learn speech through their parents and other adults. Through inquiry and questions students also learn. The same is true for writing. Students learn to write through imitation and modeling. I believe that through the use of mentors and mentor text students learn to write well.

- *Some students will require more support and conferencing to support the use of the mentor text. Some students may not use the writing process or apply writer's craft gleaned from mentor texts independently.*

Like Fletcher (2001) pointed out, some students seem to naturally understand how to craft a story like a professional writer by “lingering at the right moment” or “writing by ear” (p. 74). Many students build this ear by having good mentors; however, many students cannot make this same connection on their own. Lori, Lisa and Evelyn were three students with such an ear. With nothing more than a quick check-in I could make a few suggestions and they would turn those suggestions into gold. Yet there were a few other students who were not as successful. Moses, for example, wrote several pages but rarely applied what was taught in a mini-lesson and would not revise or edit his writing. Vanessa also wrote a two page narrative but like Moses would not revise and edit independently. Michael's narrative was about half of a page but he was resistant to elaborate and was uncooperative in conferences. He struggles with anger and often becomes defensive; this became an obstacle for him in the writing

workshop. He sought my attention multiple times during a writing period and would only complete a few lines before returning to me. Despite several conferences he completed little. His narrative showed little revision and ultimately received a poor assessment.

While I conferenced with Michael more than many other students he and Brian both struggled to independently write their narratives. They did not apply what was taught in the mini-lesson and struggled to follow through with ideas discussed in a conference. Both boys were given the freedom to choose their topic but given direction how to do so. Both completed a plot map, but struggled with content, focus and word choice. During conferences I made suggestions, however, Michael and Brian did not always choose to make the revisions that we discussed in a conference. Fletcher and Portalupi (2001) warn teachers that ultimately whether or not a student makes revisions is their choice. “Avoid locking horns with students like that. The challenge is to create the kind of classroom where you suggest lots of rich ideas, and students are willing to try them out” (p.59). Though Moses, Vanessa and Michael didn’t necessarily make the kind of progress I was hoping for; they still made some small steps. Their progress was slow and their steps smaller than the rest of the class, yet there were a few gold nuggets in their final pieces.

The writing teacher’s task never changes, they should continue to meet with and model the writing process and writers craft with their students, whether

through mentor text or other strategy. As my literature review points out, the goal of assessing writing should not be to just give grades but rather for students to learn and grow as writers. Dahl and Farnan (1998) say that the primary purpose of assessment is for students to learn what works in a writing task (p.111). Even though these students did not make the progress that my other students made using mentor text, I continued to scaffold and model in my conferences and though their steps were small, they took those steps. These findings are consistent with the following quote by Ralph Fletcher (2001) who stated that “good teaching can help all children make the reading-writing connections that certain students have seemingly made on their own” (p. 74). Many of my students made connections after an initial mini-lesson, while others continued to need my support.

Despite these struggles, my class grew as writers throughout the study. On my survey the final question asked if the students felt more like an author at the end of the study than they did in the beginning. Though ten percent were neutral, which would equate to two students, sixty-five percent strongly, agreed and twenty-five percent agreed that they felt more like an author. One student stated, “I started writing longer stories. I am proud of writing longer stories. I like the detail, too.”

NOW WHAT?

This study has been a tremendous learning experience for both me and my students. I feel that I know this class better than perhaps any other class I have had in the past. I also have learned a tremendous amount about myself, both as a teacher, learner and person in general. My research has shown me the benefits of using mentor text to teach writing. It has also informed me of the best practices in writing and thus has made me a more knowledgeable writing teacher. My study has also demonstrated that my current practices in the instruction of writing, such as one-on-one conferences, modeling, dialogue and writing with my students are valuable practices.

I have, however, recognized that there is so much more to learn. I have only scratched the surface of writing instruction and the use of mentor text. I would like to plan more lessons using mentor text for next year and will continue to use the strategy to model what professional authors do. I now look at picture books for what they can teach my writers and in class I often find more connections to books we are reading than I had previously.

My study has also brought to light the importance of mentors in the classroom. The use of mentor text ensures that my students have professional mentors at their fingertips that they can use to shop to improve their craft. At the same time I am a mentor as I share my own writing with students or as I

encourage them in a conference. I can struggle with writers block or choose a topic, model the writing process and celebrate a published draft just like they do. Students in turn conference with one another, share writing ideas and use mentor text to teach one another.

My favorite part of my study was being made aware of just how much my students learn from conferencing with their peers and me. The one-on-one conference has always been my favorite part of the writing workshop and now I understand better the value it has for my students.

There are, however, many areas I would like to improve upon. I would like to conduct whole class conferences and model peer conferences more in the beginning of the year, as suggested by Reggie Routman (2005), so that I will be able to simplify the writing workshop earlier in the year. I would also like to see my writers become more independent, as Routman (2005) also suggests. Michael still demands my attention while Moses and Vanessa continue to resist revising and editing independently. I would like to be more prepared to deal with these students and be able to help them more effectively.

In addition, I would also like to continue my research of the use of mentor text and the writing workshop. Though I read a tremendous amount for this study, there was more reading than I could possibly do in one year. I look forward to continuing my research in the area of best practices in writing.

There are several questions that I would like to study further. One is how to improve student sentence fluency for second language learners. Another is how to best model and facilitate peer conferencing so that students are more independent during the writing workshop. I also believe that research into the mentor process in the classroom would also be valuable. Though time is an issue for all teachers, dialogue, whether it be in writing, math, science or reading is tremendously valuable. Further research in this area would also be valuable.

While my study has concluded, what I have learned has changed my teaching pedagogy and spurred me onto continue to research best practices so that I can be the most effective teacher that I can be. A writing community has begun to develop in my school. Also, as a result of my study I've had the opportunity to lead a writing in-service. I am honored to have participated in the action research cycle of inquiry and to be able to contribute to the larger educative world.

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Picture books and other mentor text used in mini-lessons:

Clement, R. (1997) *Grandpa's Teeth*. Sydney, Australia: Harper Collins Publishers.

LaRochelle, D. & Egielski, R. (2007) *The End*. New York: Scholastic.

MacLachlan, P. (1995). *What you know first*. Joanna Cotler Books.

Rylant, C. (1986). *Night in the country*. New York: Bradbury Press.

Schnetzler, P. & Sealock, R. (2002) *Widdermaker*. Minneapolis, MN: Carolrhoda Books, Inc.

Shannon, D. (1998) *A bad case of stripes*. New York, NY: The Blue Sky Press.

Steig, W. (1990). *Shrek*. Farrar: Douglas & McIntyre Ltd.

Trivizas, E. & Oxenbury, H. (1993) *The three little wolves and the big bad pig*.
New York: Aladdin Paperbacks.

Viorst, J. (1971). *The Tenth Good Thing About Barney*. New York: Aladdin Paperbacks.

APPENDIX

Appendix-A HSIRB Form

This form must be completed for any research activity involving human participants. All researchers must read the Moravian College Human Subjects Research Policy found at <p:\hsirb\MoravianCollegeHSIRBPolicy.doc>

Part I: RESEARCHER

| | |
|--|---|
| 1. Proposer: Lisa E. Flannigan | 2. Department: MEDU |
| 3. Mailing address: 1808 Willow Dr. Easton, PA 18040 | 4. Phone: 484-894-3233 |
| 5. E-mail address: | |
| 6. This is a (circle one) a. New Proposal b. Resubmission of a rejected Proposal c. Renewal d. Request for modification | 7. Research Start/End Dates: August 29, 2011 – November 18, 2011 |
| 7. Title of Proposal: Writing Narratives with a Borrowed Voice | |

Part II: SUBMITTING PROPOSALS

Incomplete documentation will delay the Human Subjects Internal Review Board (HSIRB) review of your research proposal. Submit **all** of the following:

1. This Human Subjects Internal Review Board Proposal Form
2. A copy of your Informed Consent form and/or other evidence of Informed Consent to voluntary participation [See HSIRB proposed Policy #MC.116 & MC.117. Can be viewed at [Public/hsirb/](#)]
3. A copy of your instruments (surveys, tests, etc.)

Submit proposals to:

George Brower, Chair HSIRB
 Economics and Business Department
 Moravian College
 1200 Main Street
 Bethlehem, PA 18018

Part III: SIGNATURES

| | |
|-----------------------|-------|
| PROPOSER'S Signature: | Date: |
|-----------------------|-------|

For Student Proposals

I am the Principal Instructor for this student. I have examined the procedures in this study and approve them as described.

INSTRUCTOR'S Signature:

Date:

INSTRUCTOR'S Name (Type or Print): Dr. Richard Grove

Part IV: PROPOSAL

1. This research involves **ONLY** the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude or achievement). (Circle one.) Yes | **No**

2. This research collects interviews or surveys ONLY of elected or appointed public officials or candidates for such. (Circle one.) Yes | **No**
3. This research involves ONLY observations of public behavior. (Circle one.) Yes | **No**
4. This research involves ONLY existing data, documents, records or specimens.

(Circle one.) Yes | **No**

5. List the research funding sources, if any.

None

6. The results of this research will be published. (Circle one.) **Yes** | No | Uncertain
7. Summarize the Purpose of Research, including a. objectives, b. procedures, c. design, d. what is required of subjects, and e. procedures to reduce risks to subjects. Attach additional pages as needed.

A. Objectives:

To improve students' narrative writing through the use of mentor authors to teach writing traits.

Students will learn to read as a writer.

Students will identify techniques used by professional authors.

Students will apply techniques used by professional authors in their own writing.

Students will be able to write a narrative according to the six trait rubric.

B. Procedures

I will use mentor text teach various skills as I teach the process of writing a narrative.

I will use a gradual release of responsibility approach to teaching writing by

Introducing the skill

Using a mentor author or text to model the skill

Discussing the author's technique

Allowing students to practice applying the technique with peers

Having the students apply the technique to their developing narrative

C. Time Line

Prior to the study:

First week of school send home consent forms.

Pre-assessment for writers

Administer interest survey and background survey

Discuss study with class. Handout checklist and explain.

During the study:

Week 1: Students will generate a list of ideas for their personal narrative.

Conference with individual students.

Week 2: Students will learn to write focused narratives.

Conference with individual students.

Week 3: Students will learn to narrow the time focus of their narratives.

Conference with individual students.

Participant check

Week 4: Students will work on adding detail pertaining to the focus of their narratives to improve content.

Conference with individual students.

Week 5: Students will work on writing with voice. (Students may publish the previous narrative and begin a new one or they may edit the previous narrative for voice.)

Conference with individual students.

Participant check.

Week 6: Students will write the introduction and conclusions for their narratives with voice.

Week 7: Students will revise their writing for word choice which will improve the voice in their writing.

Conference with individual students.

Week 8: Students will begin publishing their final piece.

Conference with individual students.

Post survey:

Collect and assess completed narratives.

Administer post study survey.

D. Research Design:

1. Methods

- a. I will survey students about their thoughts and feelings about writing ().
- b. I will pre-assess student writing by having them write a narrative for the following prompt, “A Summer Moment”.
- c. I will survey my students about their prior knowledge of writing traits and the writing process.
- d. I will keep a daily field log of observed experiences including input from writing conferences.
- e. I will observe students use of mentor authors in their writing.
- f. I will conduct formal and informal student interviews to gain insight on students’ feelings on using mentor text to improve their writing.
- g. I will collect writing samples weekly to monitor student application of techniques modeled by mentor authors.
- h. I will assess published narrative for six writing traits modeled by mentor authors.
- i. I will administer a mid study survey.
- j. I will administer a post study survey.

2. Analysis

- a. I will analyze student writing progress throughout the study.
- b. I will analyze student surveys to identify themes and changes throughout the study.

c. I will analyze the published narratives to identify to what extent students have applied techniques used by professional authors.

d. I will analyze the published narratives with the six trait rubrics for growth in writing compared to the pre-assessment.

E. Requirements

1. All students will participate in the writing workshop and activities.
2. Students will keep a writing notebook.
3. Students will complete all assigned activities.
4. Students will submit a published narrative.
5. Students will complete all surveys.

F. Procedures to reduce risks.

1. I will maintain confidentiality and anonymity of students.
 - a. All students will be assigned a pseudonym.
 - b. All materials will be kept in a filing cabinet out of student reach.
2. Data will only be analyzed and reported for students who have submitted signed consent forms.
3. Participation in the study will not impact students' grades.
4. Participants and non-participants will not be signaled out.
5. Students may withdraw from the data collection plan of my study at any time.

8. This research involves the following GROUP(S) vulnerable to risk. (Circle all that apply.)

- a. **Subjects under the age of 18**
- b. Prisoners
- c. Pregnant women
- d. **Handicapped or mentally disabled persons**

If you circled any or all of 8a through 8d, explain why you need to use the group and the methods you will use to minimize risk.

My study will analyze the progress of fourth grades students, therefore my study will require participants under the age of 18. Therefore I will do the following to minimize risk to these students.

1. I will maintain confidentiality and anonymity of students.
 - a. All students will be assigned a pseudonym.
 - b. All materials will be kept in a locked filing cabinet out of student reach.
2. Data will only be analyzed and reported for students who have submitted signed consent forms.
3. Participation in the study will not impact students' grades.
4. Participants and non-participants will not be signaled out.
5. Students may withdraw from the data collection plan of my study at any time.

Although I do not know the students that will be in my class it is likely that a few of these students will either be ELL or have an IEP or 504 plan, therefore I will do the following to minimize risk for these students by doing the following.

1. I will adhere to all legal requirements pertaining to these documents.
 2. I will modify instruction and assessment according to the individual requirements of the IEP or 504.
 3. All parents have the right to choose if their child will be a participant in the study.
 4. Participation will not in anyway impact students' grades.
9. This research might affect people with special vulnerabilities (for example, pregnant women, people with allergies, people taking some medications, etc.) (Circle one.) **Yes** | **No**

If Yes, explain the methods you will use to minimize risk to these people.

10. Describe your subject pool including a. the intended number of subjects and b. characteristics.

Fourth grade class

25 students 9-10 years old

Mixed ability

Diverse in race and socioeconomic status.

It is possible that I will have students that are ELL or have IEPs.

11. Describe the methods you will use to recruit your subjects.

Students will be assigned by current third grade teachers and school principal.

All students will participate in activities.

Data will only be included as part of my study from students whom have submitted signed consent forms will.

No recruitment methods will be needed.

12. This research involves deception of subjects. (Circle one.) Yes | **No**

If Yes, describe the nature of the deception and your debriefing procedure.

13. Explain by whom and how the subjects will be informed of the purposes of this research project. [Make references to HSIRB Policy #MC.116 & #MC.117.]

I will inform my parents and students of this research study by sending home a consent form. This form will be sent home during the first few days of school. It will explain the purpose of my study, my objectives, the possible benefits of the strategy and efforts I am taking to minimize risk. Parents will be able to choose if their child will be a participant in the study, but will be informed that all students will receive the same instruction in writing.

14. This research collects information, which (Circle all that apply.)

- a. deals with sensitive aspects from the participant's point of view.
- b. identifies the subject by name or number codes.**
- c. might place the subject at risk of liability if made public.
- d. might place the subject's financial standing or employability at risk if made public.

If you circled any or all of 14a through 14d, explain the methods you will use to

- a. safeguard the data you collect
 - b. inform subjects of available support services, and
 - c. minimize the risk to the subjects.
1. Students will be assigned pseudonyms. Student's true names will not be used or insinuated in my thesis.
 2. All raw data will be destroyed at the culmination of the study.

Appendix B: Consent Forms

Dear Parents / Guardians,

I am presently attending Moravian College to earn a Master's Degree in Curriculum and Instruction. Many of my classes have provided information and opportunities that allow me to stay current with the most effective teaching methods, and in turn I am able to provide my students with the best learning experiences. As part of the program I am required to reflect on my own teaching practices. Therefore, I will be conducting an action research study and collecting data to examine how the strategy of using mentor text to model and teach writing will impact student voice, style and focus in their writing.

Some may brush aside that children can write well, with a voice and style all their own. However, I believe that students can learn to write well. My purpose, therefore, is to utilize mentor text, or books and stories written by professional writers, as models to help students write with voice, style and focus. The model texts will be highly engaging books and stories that the students may or may not be familiar with. However, as we discuss how authors write, I

believe that students will also begin to make connections between the reading and writing process. In turn by utilizing mentor text to teach writing, students' reading comprehension will also be improved. The main source of data collection will come from student writing; however they will also be asked to complete a survey in the beginning of the project and again at the end. I will also conduct interviews with randomly selected students during the study.

All children will be involved in the activities and projects related to my study. I am asking for your permission to use the data gathered pertaining to your child's involvement; however, participation in this study is entirely voluntary and will not affect your child's grade in any way. All student names will be kept confidential, as will the name of the school district or any participating faculty members. Only my name and the names of my sponsoring professors will appear in any written report or publication of this study, and all research will be secured in a protected location. At the culmination of the study data, other than the students' writing, will be destroyed. Please also understand that students may withdraw from this study without penalty at any time.

Should you have any questions regarding my research, please feel free to contact me. Our principal has approved this study, but should you want to speak with her for any reason, you may reach her at 1-610-866-9660. My faculty sponsor at Moravian College is Dr. Joseph Shosh. He can be reached at Moravian at 610-861-1482 or by email at jshosh@moravian.edu. I am asking that you check the appropriate response below, then sign and date the form. I would appreciate your returning the form at your earliest convenience. I thank you so very much for your cooperation and support.

Sincerely,

Lisa Flannigan

4th Grade Teacher

Please sign one copy and return to Ms. Flannigan. Keep a second copy for your records.

I attest that I am the child's legal guardian and that I have received a copy, read, and understand this consent form. Please initial the appropriate box below

_____ I am willing to have my child participate in Ms. Flannigan's action research study.

_____ I am not willing to have my child participate in Ms. Flannigan's action research study.

Parent/Guardian signature: _____

Child's Name: _____

Date: _____

Dear Mrs. Walter, Principal,

I am presently attending Moravian College to earn a Master's Degree in Curriculum and Instruction. Many of my classes have provided information and opportunities that allow me to stay current with the most effective teaching methods, and in turn I am able to provide my students with the best learning experiences. As part of the program I am required to reflect on my own teaching practices. Therefore, I will be conducting an action research study and collecting data to examine how the strategy of using mentor text to model and teach writing will impact student voice, style and focus in their writing.

Some may brush aside that children can write well, with a voice and style all their own. However, I believe that students can learn to write well. My purpose, therefore, is to utilize mentor text, or books and stories written by professional writers, as models to help students write with voice, style and focus. The model texts will be highly engaging books and stories that the students may or may not be familiar with. However, as we discuss how authors write, I believe that students will also begin to make connections between the reading and writing process. In turn by utilizing mentor text to teach writing, students' reading comprehension will also be improved. The main source of data collection will come

from student writing; however they will also be asked to complete a survey in the beginning of the project and again at the end. I will also conduct interviews with randomly selected students during the study.

All children will be involved in the activities and projects related to my study. I am asking for your permission perform this action research study in my 4th grade classroom here at the Lehigh Valley Academy. This study, despite it's results, will improve my own pedagogy, however, I also hope to contribute to the faculty my learning from the discoveries made through my inquiry. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and will not affect the students' grades in any way. All student names will be kept confidential, as will the name of the school district or any participating faculty members. Only my name and the names of my sponsoring professors will appear in any written report or publication of this study, and all research will be secured in a protected location. Please also understand that students may withdraw from this study without penalty at any time.

Should you have any questions regarding my research, please feel free to contact me or my faculty sponsor at Moravian College, Dr. Joseph Shosh. He can be reached at Moravian at 610-861-1482 or by email at jshosh@moravian.edu. I am asking that you check the appropriate response below, then sign and date the form. I would appreciate your returning the form at you earliest convenience. I thank you so very much for your cooperation and support.

Sincerely,

Lisa Flannigan

4th Grade Teacher

Please sign one copy and return to Ms. Flannigan. Keep a second copy for your records.

I attest that I am the child's legal guardian and that I have received a copy, read, and understand this consent form. Please initial the appropriate box below

_____ I approve Ms. Flannigan's action research study.

_____ I do not approve Ms. Flannigan's action research study.

Signature: _____

Appendix C: NCTE List

Teachers need to understand at least the following in order to be excellent at writing assessment:

- How to find out what student writers can do, informally, on an ongoing basis.
- How to use that assessment in order to decide what and how to teach next.
- How to assess occasionally, less frequently than above, in order to form judgments about the quality of student writing and learning.
- How to assess ability and knowledge across multiple different writing engagements.

- What the features of good writing are, appropriate to the context and purposes of the teaching and learning.
- What the elements of a constructive process of writing are, appropriate to the context and purposes of the teaching and learning.
- What growth in writing looks like, the developmental aspects of writing ability.
- Ways of assessing student metacognitive process of the reading/writing connection.
- How to recognize in students writing (both in their texts and in their actions) the nascent potential for excellence at the features and processes desired.
- How to deliver useful feedback, appropriate for the writer and the situation.
- How to analyze writing situations for their most essential elements, so that assessment is not of everything about writing all at once, but rather is targeted to objectives.
- How to analyze and interpret both qualitative and quantitative writing assessments.
- How to evaluate electronic texts.
- How to use portfolios to assist writers in their development.
- How self-assessment and reflection contribute to a writer's development and ability to move among genres, media, and rhetorical situations.

(National Council of Teachers of English, 2004, pp. 8-9)

Appendix D: Focus rubric.

DOMAIN #1: FOCUS

ADVANCED

(Excellent)

- 4** = The paper is clear, focused on the topic, and purposeful. The author has the audience in mind when writing.
- I know a lot about this topic and when someone else reads it, they'll find out some new or little-known information.
 - I made sure my topic was small enough to handle.
 - I can easily answer the question, "What is the point of this paper/story?"

PROFICIENT

(Good / Adequate)

- 3** = Topic is noticeable, but writer strays somewhat from the point. There seem to be varied reasons for the writing. Audience might also vary.
- I start with a strong, focused topic but then I lose my way and the reader may have difficulty following my train of thought.
 - Sometimes I was very clear about what I meant, but at other times, it was still fuzzy.

BASIC

(Unsatisfactory / Failing)

- 2** = The topic is very hard to pinpoint. The information is not anchored with a clear purpose for writing. Identification of a specific audience is a guess.
- I haven't shared much information. I may not know enough yet about this topic to write about it.
 - Maybe I'll write about this, but then maybe I'll write about that.

BELOW BASIC

(Unsatisfactory / Failing)

- 1** = The writer has not really identified a topic. It is just many ideas strung together. What's the purpose? Who is the intended audience?
- I'm still thinking aloud on paper. I'm still looking for a good idea.
 - It would be quite difficult to answer the question, "What is the point of this paper?"

Appendix E: Pre-study Survey

Appendix E: How I See Myself as a Writer

How I See Myself as a Writer

Name: _____ Date: _____

Directions: Please answer all of the questions below in complete sentences.

1. What are your strengths as a writer?



2. What type of writing do you like to do best?



3. What are some important things to keep in mind as you write?



4. Explain a time when you experienced a positive writing experience in which you really enjoyed what you were writing.



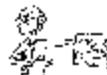
5. What are some things you need to do in order to improve your writing?



6. Explain the things you know about the writing process.



7. Explain what you know about graphic organizers and thinking maps.



8. What do you like to write most about?



Franklin D. Roosevelt Writing Survey



Name: _____

Date: _____



Writing Survey

Directions: Please answer all of the questions below in complete sentences.

1. Have you ever considered yourself an author? If so, when? What was your writing about? _____

2. Why do you think people like to write? _____

3. Do you think most people like to write? Why or why not? _____

4. Do your parents write? If so, what do they write about? _____

5. Who is your favorite author? Why? _____

6. Are there any books by a certain author that have helped you with your writing? Who is the author and how did he or she help? _____

7. How do you come up with your ideas about what to write? _____

8. What are your favorite topics to write about? _____

9. Where is your favorite place to write? _____

10. When is the best time of day for you to write? _____

11. Is there anything you do to help get excited about writing? _____

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Library of Congress

Appendix F: Post Study Survey

Read each question carefully and choose an answer. If there is a text box, please type a short answer.

Word Choice: "the language a writer chooses to express his or her ideas."
(Spandel,2002, p.56)

Voice: How you say what you have to say.

Focus: Small moment that is elaborated upon.

Introductions: Beginnings of your stories or writing pieces.

I feel that the use of mentor text has helped me choose an appropriate topic in my writing.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

I feel that the use of mentor text has improved my focus in my writing.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree

- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

I feel that the use of mentor text has improved the voice in my writing.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

I feel that the use of mentor text has helped me write better introductions to my stories.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral

- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

I feel that I understand plot in stories after creating my own plot map in my story.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

I spend time revising my writing.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Revising and editing with my classmates has helped my writing.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

* If you feel that peer conferencing has helped your writing, give a specific example of how it has helped you.



I feel that conferencing with the teacher has helped my writing.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree

Strongly Disagree

If you feel that conferencing with the teacher has helped improve your writing, explain how or why it was helpful.

Rank each of the following on how helpful they were to you in your writing.

3 Stars = Very helpful

2 Stars = Kind of helpful

1 Star = Not very helpful

Mentor text

Peer conferencing

Teacher conference

Conferencing with second grade

Conferencing with fifth grade

Mini lessons in class

When the teacher models writing for you

I have used a mentor text to help me prewrite my narrative.

Yes

No

I have used a mentor text to help me write my narrative.

Yes

No

I have used a mentor text to help me revise my narrative.

Yes

No

I have used a mentor text to help me edit my narrative.

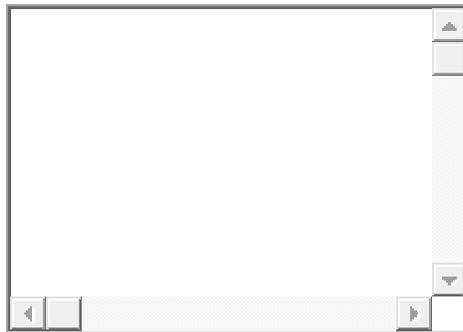
Yes

No

What helped you improve your writing the most? Explain below.



What do you feel has improved the most in your writing?



I feel more like an author now than I did in the beginning of the year?

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree

Appendix G: Peer Conferencing Sheet

Conference Revision Checklist

Author: _____ Date: _____

Title: _____ Genre/Format: _____

Self-reflection

I read this piece: once ? twice ? several times ? aloud to myself ?

One change I decided to make is _____

I think this makes sense because _____

The part I like best is _____

Peer Conference

Conference Partner Name: _____

1. Something you did well in this piece is _____

2. I especially like _____

3. Something that I suggest you consider is _____

Do you need an extended teacher conference? Yes ? No ?

If yes, state at least two specific things that you would like to discuss:

1. _____

2. _____
