Writing Portrait: Snapshots and Masterpieces

Travis Washmon

The University of New England

Introduction: A look inside

 On any given day, my classroom serves as a portal to the past, a gateway to the future, a live minefield, a safe haven from the zombie apocalypse, or a magical tree house made of lightning. It also serves as a library, a research facility, a laboratory, and a courtroom. My students learn by writing. They grow by writing. And they dream bigger, by writing. There are a few things that work against me in making this all happen, but, in the end, it all works out and learning happens.

 My classroom is small; it’s about 20’x12,’ has no windows, and is located in a repurposed office building. We don’t have computers (besides the two ancient ones that I have brought from home and set up in the class). The physical setting of my classroom is oppressive at times and was very difficult for me to overcome when planning the space. But, I have managed to make the room inviting and organized for communal and independent writing. I believe that the settings in which writers work effects their overall capability to create. Ideally, I would love to have the much imagined beanbag-n-lapdesk classroom of Oberlin College, but I make the desk and chair thing work. Windows would be great to defeat the Mondays (aka Mondaze), but I defeat the prison feel by brightening things up with additional lamps and brightly colored artwork.

 Besides the physical setting, the “home office’s” obsession with unnecessary, and at times arbitrary, benchmarking creates a great deal of confusion and discord among the young writers in my class. I teach sixth grade English, but the issue is K-12. Harmony Science Academy is a charter school in Texas that offers a supposed preparatory school experience for free to low income families. The school has a great deal of commercial success, but underneath, there is a huge disconnect between the effective classroom and the unrealistic and sometimes antique expectations and practices mandated by the “home office.” By the way, the ‘home office” is what we call the supervisory campus of all Harmony School, which is located in Houston, Texas.

 In Texas, we are subject to the STAAR (State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness) test. The “home office” controls the curriculum for every subject, but gives English teachers a great deal of leeway to teach in our own way. It’s a nice gesture, but for many teachers, the added apparent strong-arming causes them to follow the spoon fed curriculum exactly. For instance, sixth graders take Reading, Science, and Math STAAR tests. Guess what the curriculum for ELAR classes looks like? It calls for intensive reading skill instruction without any writing instruction at all, and yet, at training, we are all taught the balanced literacy approach. Confusing? Yes, especially for new teachers who are afraid to go out on a limb and try new teaching strategies.

 I teach sixth grade, but I refuse to teach reading without writing. I know that one without the other would be like having a cone and no ice cream. My writing class goes hand in hand with my reading class (since they are in fact one and the same). We spend half our time reading and the other half writing, sometimes about the reading and sometimes about the dog we saw pooping on a picnic blanket at the park last week.

**The Writing**

 Every one of my class periods begins with a “Bellringer.” The Bellringer is always creative in nature and is often tied to whatever we are reading or writing about in class at that time, or has to do with current social or moral issues in the classroom or school at large. The students have a journal that is dedicated to writing in class, and a journal that is dedicated to writing at home. I do allow students to combine the two if they prefer, as long as they prove that they can keep order in their writings. An example of a Bellringer in my class would look like this: “Shhhh… can you hear it? It’s flapping its wings and purring, like a sleeping kitten. Describe it to me, and tell me its story.” The Bellringer usually falls into one of the sensory categories or in a purely creative one. I will have a song playing when the students walk in and they will respond to the music in whatever way they see fit. There will be a picture or painting projected on the wall and they will respond to that. Sometimes there will be a quote or lyrics posted that they will respond to. Or, there will be manipulables to touch, or smell, or taste, or all of the above to respond to.

 Of course, the early year begins with at least a few modeling periods for each different type of Bellringer. I use the document camera or small group models to do this. Soon enough though, the students take it and run with it. The Bellringer, although only 5-10 minutes long is a crucial part of my writing classroom and allows the students to practice opening their minds to all kinds of writing and sharing their thoughts freely with others.

 After the Bellringer, classroom writing ranges depending on the genre or theme we are studying at the time. Because I believe in the validity of the balanced literacy approach within the gradual release model, we are always reading and or writing. We do not have time for spelling tests, vocabulary flashcards, or sentence dissections. We write like real writers; we create writing based on the needs of our prospective audiences. I prefer to use the CCP (consume, critique, produce) for genre studies, and then focus on thematic units as a follow-up to the genre study. No matter what the genre or theme we are studying, students have a choice when it comes to the produce phase of the CCP.

 For instance, if we are studying the personal narrative as a genre, when the produce phase comes, I give the students a range of audiences to choose from. There is always the option to simply produce a piece within the genre, but, there is also the choice to write an analysis, review, extension, translation (my personal creation in which students take one genre and turn it into another), or any other writing project that students can justify in writing. Each student must submit a proposal for the project to me in writing and await approval before beginning. Students can only produce one piece of each genre or format per year (they can’t write two short stories or two analyses). I also allow them to create alternative text products as well, such as digital stories, visual/audio texts, and performed pieces.

 I provide students live models for as many genres and formats as possible and I provide them premade models for many others. I stress that writing begins as a copied art and as tools are added to the belt of the artist, copies become originals, and sometimes they become masterpieces. So, to give them those tools, we work through the writing process using gradual release. The first time, I go through it all alone and the students watch and listen and question and copy. Then, we go through it together, slowly, keeping at the same pace and discussing our personal struggles and successes to learn from each other. Then I offer the opportunity to go at it alone. Some students take the chance and others prefer to be walked through it again. Eventually, though, everyone is working at his own pace, individually.

 I continually conference with each student on a circuit, as well as by request, to ensure that progress is being made and that the student has not gotten off track or completely off-task. Conferences take place at the student’s desk and last anywhere from thirty seconds to five minutes. I tend to conference with every student at each phase of the writing process, or at each structural juncture (intro, body, conclusion, etc.) of the piece. By the time the writing portfolio is turned in, there isn’t anything for me to grade because I’ve been grading it all along. Then, we all post our final products to the class blog and await peer and teacher feedback.

 In addition to the in-class writing, all my students keep a personal journal in which they write anything they choose (a minimum of half a page per day), and which does not need to be read by anyone. I simply glance at the pages every week and look at dates to ensure they are writing. This writing is one that is supposed to build a need for personal writing as a therapeutic as well as an educational process. Students are always asked to write like they would in class, practicing proper grammar and form, but to always stay true to themselves when it comes to content. Some students have taken to writing novels, books of poetry, or deeply personal memoirs in their journals. Others come to me in tears with self-discovery or to show me their secrets and ask for help. Sometimes we have to call the police or Child Protective Services together. Other times, students never take to personal writing and do it simply out of respect for me; because I asked them to. I model journal writing and often share my personal writings with my students.

**The Ideal**

 I love my writing classroom. I’ve worked hard to make it what it is now. But, if I could have anything, if I could create a picture perfect writing classroom, some things would certainly change. To begin with, I would have ten hours a week of instructional time per section. That would allow me the time to devote five hours of reading focus and five hours of writing focus. Balanced literacy could then be truly balanced. We could begin the writing workshop at the same time we start the reading workshop and could dissect and replicate each and every genre or theme as we consume it. I could spend more time on teaching each writer’s craft element and could incorporate more grammar and vocabulary into the writing classroom as these are the first to be cut when time runs short.

 I would also give each student a netbook with internet and word processing capabilities (any other software would just be gravy). When it comes to consuming genre, online searches are a teacher’s best friend. When students find reading material within the genre on their own, they become much more interested in reading it. When they’re more interested in reading it, they are more apt to produce the connected writing piece. They could also see the ways real writing is published in the world and aspire to have their own writings published in similar ways. Thus, excitement about writing is built up. Students would have a greater amount of mobility too, when it comes to research and word processing. Most important, is the fact that the netbook, and the digital atmosphere in general, prepares students for 21st century writing. I use the classroom blog so that students can get feedback from one another and from me at any time, whether we are in school or not. With the netbooks, students can post portions of their work while still in progress and get feedback from other classmates and other classes, as well as from me. It’s social networking with purely educational ends.

 Sure, I’d love to have class outside or fill my room with the aforementioned beanbags and lapdesks, but if I had the netbooks and the ten hour instructional week incorporated into my current writing classroom, everything would be Zen. All of the reading we have discussed have served to validate what I do in my classroom. Baines and Kunkel (2010) include several lessons that I already use in their book *Going Bohemian.* My writing classroom is structured in a way that teaches the importance of organization and planned execution while allowing for creative vision and growth as is discussed in chapter six of Graham, MacArthur, and Fitzgerald’s (2007) book *Best Practices in Writing Instruction.* Every discussion I had in this class has resulted in both teacher and peer offering me congratulations on what I do. I don’t want to change my writing class, I just want resources and time.

**The Common Core Standards?**

 So now that it’s clear that my writing classroom is effective and my dream classroom would be even more effective, the question is, would the CCSS agree? Let’s take a look at the CCSSs for writing in 6th grade ELAR:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Text Types and Purposes | Write arguments to support claims with clearreasons and relevant evidence.a. Introduce claim(s) and organize the reasonsand evidence clearly.b. Support claim(s) with clear reasons andrelevant evidence, using credible sources anddemonstrating an understanding of the topicor text.c. Use words, phrases, and clauses to clarify therelationships among claim(s) and reasons.d. Establish and maintain a formal style.e. Provide a concluding statement or sectionthat follows from the argument presented. |
| Text Types and Purposes | Write informative/explanatory texts to examine atopic and convey ideas, concepts, and informationthrough the selection, organization, and analysisof relevant content.a. Introduce a topic; organize ideas, concepts,and information, using strategies such asdefinition, classification, comparison/contrast,and cause/effect; include formatting (e.g.,headings), graphics (e.g., charts, tables),and multimedia when useful to aidingcomprehension.b. Develop the topic with relevant facts,definitions, concrete details, quotations, orother information and examples.c. Use appropriate transitions to clarify therelationships among ideas and concepts.d. Use precise language and domain-specificvocabulary to inform about or explain thetopic.e. Establish and maintain a formal style.f. Provide a concluding statement or section thatfollows from the information or explanationpresented |
| Text Types and Purposes | Write narratives to develop real or imaginedexperiences or events using effective technique,relevant descriptive details, and well-structuredevent sequences.a. Engage and orient the reader by establishinga context and introducing a narrator and/orcharacters; organize an event sequence thatunfolds naturally and logically.b. Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue,pacing, and description, to developexperiences, events, and/or characters.c. Use a variety of transition words, phrases, andclauses to convey sequence and signal shiftsfrom one time frame or setting to another.d. Use precise words and phrases, relevantdescriptive details, and sensory language toconvey experiences and events.e. Provide a conclusion that follows from thenarrated experiences or events. |
| Production and Distribution of Writing | Produce clear and coherent writing in whichthe development, organization, and style areappropriate to task, purpose, and audience.(Grade-specific expectations for writing types aredefined in standards 1–3 above.) |
| Production and Distribution of Writing | With some guidance and support from peers andadults, develop and strengthen writing as neededby planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or tryinga new approach. (Editing for conventions shoulddemonstrate command of Language standards1–3 up to and including grade 6 on page 52.) |
| Production and Distribution of Writing | Use technology, including the Internet, to produceand publish writing as well as to interact andcollaborate with others; demonstrate sufficientcommand of keyboarding skills to type a minimumof three pages in a single sitting. |
| Research to Build and Present Knowledge | Conduct short research projects to answera question, drawing on several sources andrefocusing the inquiry when appropriate. |
| Research to Build and Present Knowledge | Gather relevant information from multiple printand digital sources; assess the credibility of eachsource; and quote or paraphrase the data andconclusions of others while avoiding plagiarismand providing basic bibliographic information forsources. |
| Research to Build and Present Knowledge | Draw evidence from literary or informational textsto support analysis, reflection, and research.a. Apply *grade 6 Reading standards* to literature(e.g., “Compare and contrast texts in differentforms or genres [e.g., stories and poems;historical novels and fantasy stories] in termsof their approaches to similar themes andtopics”).b. Apply *grade 6 Reading standards* to literarynonfiction (e.g., “Trace and evaluate theargument and specific claims in a text,distinguishing claims that are supported byreasons and evidence from claims that arenot”). |
| Range of Writing | Write routinely over extended time frames (timefor research, reflection, and revision) and shortertime frames (a single sitting or a day or two) fora range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, andaudiences. |

Each of the four domains of the writing standards in the CCSS support the standards I maintain in my own classes. I offer a variety of writing assignments which allow for writing “routinely over extended time frames” and a “range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.” In fact, I feel that because we go further in my writing classroom by studying, not only test specific genres and themes, but a much larger range of genres and themes, my students could even meet the CCSSs for 7th and 8th grade.

**The Masterpiece**

 A look into my writing classroom is a look into a vortex of creativity and organized chaos. We write together, discuss together, read together, and grow together. Writing is not just a process in my classroom, it’s a lifestyle. We simply *are* writers. When we assume the persona, the standards need not apply because we make the standards. The writing classroom is a masterpiece.

**References**

Baines, L., & Kunkel, A.  (2010 2nd Ed.).  *Going bohemian: How to teach writing like you mean it*. International Reading Association: Newark, DE.

Graham, S. & Harris, K. (2007) Best practices in teaching planning. In S. Graham, C. MacArthur, & J. Fitzgerald (Eds.), *Best practices in writing  instruction* (pp.119-140). New York: The Guilford Press.