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# Introduction: To Write and to Teach

I love to write. I write for many reasons. I write to reflect and to inspire. I write to release my creativity. I write to learn about the world around me. I write because I feel the need to write. Few things satisfy me more than the time I spend writing.

I also love to teach. There is such promise in the youth before us. Watching a student grasp a difficult concept, hearing a student new to Canada and our language speak in front of the class for the first time, or witnessing the moment when this skill called reading becomes real for a child — this is why I teach. I want to help my students fulfill their promise.

So, when I have the opportunity to teach writing to my students, well, my two passions fuel each other.

I know that many others find it daunting to teach writing to their students, however. Just as I feel intimidated by the thought of teaching science and sometimes even math, I understand that many teachers feel this way about writing. So, this book is meant as a tool for teaching writing. Whether you enjoy writing or are intimidated by it, this will be a valuable reference in creating a productive writing environment for your students.

## Writing as a Cross-Curricular Skill

When I consider writing in the classroom setting, I see two main functions: *learning to write* (something we know is in the curriculum and must teach) and *writing to learn* (a less talked-about function of writing in the classroom). I have not divided the book into sections to delineate these two functions. Ideally, in the classroom these functions dance and mingle throughout the day.

Although writing is a skill covered in our language arts curriculum, I am going to challenge you to think about how writing can fit into all areas of the curriculum. Students can — and should — write within every subject. In this way, they will be *writing to learn*.

While this book is primarily about writing, you are going to discover the many ways in which I use *reading* to teach writing. The connection between the two cannot be downplayed: they go hand in hand. Reading and writing help our students engage more fully in all aspects of the lives they live. Through reading, writing, and the inevitable discussions that follow, our students can learn from the experiences of others, open their minds to many possibilities, gain a glimpse of worlds unknown to them, make connections to their own lives, reflect on their own choices, and contextualize their learning. When we provide students with this time to read and explore texts — texts that may reflect their lives or open doors to other worlds — and then to write about what they think, what they feel,

and how they connect to the texts read, the experience is powerful. Adrienne Gear (2011) suggests,

Writing to engage thinking can, in fact, help change our focus and purpose for writing in school, and can perhaps help students develop a greater sense of the reader–writer connection. (p. 12)

Students begin to see writing as something more than an assignment to be handed in to their teacher. They begin to understand how reading and writing, and the interplay between the two, can lead to deeper thinking.

Our curricular focus has shifted from separate, isolated subjects that fit into precise blocks of time; we are now encouraged to integrate and teach skills that carry students across the curriculum. If we want our writing experiences to be authentic, writing cannot occur only in language arts. We must cross disciplinary boundaries. As Marion Crowhurst (1993) says,

... the emphasis in the classroom should be on using language to do real things, rather than on dummy-run exercises for practice. In this way, children will use authentic language for real purposes. They will read real texts to find out or to enjoy. They won't read texts to practice reading skills. They will write for authentic purposes — to entertain, inform, invite, thank, or persuade the teacher, the principal, their peers or the readers of the community newspaper. (p. 8)

Effective teachers have come to understand how to integrate their subjects, how to utilize their time wisely by having students read and write across the curriculum. *Writing to learn* is not a new concept. It is, however, being integrated into the classroom on a much more regular basis and certainly more successfully. Traditionally, most teachers were taught to think of writing strictly as a final product; however, writing is a process that can help students discover, create, and think critically in all disciplines of study. Through their writing experiences, students will construct meaning across the curriculum.

### Writing as an Essential Life Skill

Writing is also a skill that students will carry with them beyond the four walls of our classrooms. The *Ontario Language Curriculum* expresses the idea in this way: “Learning to communicate with clarity and precision, orally, in writing, and through a variety of media, will help students to thrive in the world beyond school” (2006, 4). As important as it is for students to view writing as functional for school, we also want them to understand the power it can hold in their lives. The written word serves practical, utilitarian functions such as street signs, labels, and store names. It also serves more lofty purposes: expressing one's ideas and ideals, giving permanence to one's thoughts, advocating for the greater good, and exploring metaphysical ideas.

Our goal, then, is to give our students an environment where they feel comfortable putting pencil to paper or fingers to keyboard, taking the necessary risks involved in the writing process.

## Writing as a Craft That Can Be Taught

I want more than that, though. Not only do I want my students to write — I want them to *enjoy* writing! I want them to view writing not as a distasteful chore, but as an exciting adventure.

But how best to achieve this ... The two most common mistakes I see teachers make when teaching writing is that their students do not write enough or there is little deliberate instruction about writing. Both are critical to our students' success. As I say to my students, simply talking about basketball will not help us to become better basketball players: we must also practise. The same is true for writing. Ideally, our students will be writing *something* daily. Fear not! With appropriate planning, this goal is quite easily accomplished. And there is certainly no need to assess everything our students write. I know that teachers work exceptionally hard and the demands sometimes seem endless. The role of this text is to make the teaching of curriculum more manageable.

The good news? Writing is a craft and can, therefore, be taught. Yes, it's true that some individuals are gifted with natural talent in this area; however, all can learn to write more effectively with appropriate teaching, modelling, and practice. Lucy Calkins speaks to the important role of the teacher:

Children deserve to be explicitly taught the skills and strategies of effective writing, and the qualities of good writing. This teaching will be dramatically more powerful if teachers are studying the teaching of writing and if they are responsive to what students are doing and trying to do as writers. Children also deserve a teacher who demonstrates a commitment to writing. (2006, 10)

Our students must spend time engaged in the process of writing *and* be taught how to improve their writing: both are necessary.

## Teaching Writing: A Gift of Empowerment

At the beginning of my career, I taught Grade 1. I saw how language, specifically learning to read and write, could empower students. It was thrilling to see student confidence levels flourish as they discovered the significance of a letter, a word, a sentence, a story. I was energized by the look of surprise on the students' faces when they became impressed with their own reading or writing. I also noticed the frustration of those who did not easily learn the skills involved in literacy.

I loved teaching Grade 1. In fact, I thought I'd teach Grade 1 forever. The progress the students made during the year was incredibly obvious, immediate, and exhilarating. The students revelled in the excitement of reading on their own for the first time or discovering new words.

Yet, as I began teaching older students (somewhat reluctantly I might add), I soon realized that the progress these students made was just as thrilling ... though perhaps not as obvious or immediate as it was in Grade 1. I realized that these students, too, need excellent instruction in language arts; they may not be *beginning* readers and writers, but effective and purposeful instruction can empower students of all ages to become more competent, confident individuals. In retrospect, I am grateful that I was open to a change in grade level: ultimately, it changed my thought process.

The ideas within this book stem from my experiences teaching students from Kindergarten to Grade 6. They have also been inspired by the many excellent teachers I have encountered over the years. No less, however, they have been influenced by experts such as Peter Elbow, Mem Fox, Nancie Atwell, Regie Routman, Lucy Calkins, Natalie Goldberg, Donald H. Graves, Tony Stead, Donald M. Murray, Adrienne Gear, and many language learning theorists.

Teaching students the skill of writing is a gift of empowerment: words change worlds.

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