

# When Writers Drive the Workshop

Honouring Young Voices and Bold Choices

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Foreword by  
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## Introduction

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**I**t has been more than 30 years since Donald Graves ([1983] 2003) first took us into classrooms of writers with his landmark book *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work*. In his book Graves describes how teachers and their students sat side by side and learned together as writers. Teachers brought their own writing experiences and know-how into the classroom to teach students and then listened carefully as children described their own decisions as writers. Teachers made instructional decisions based on their students' moves. What young writers said, and did, mattered.

For years, we've known that the structure of the writer's workshop (a mini-lesson, followed by a chunk of time for students to write and teachers to confer, culminating with an author's chair sharing experience) has been effective for young writers. But since the 1980s, writing instruction has shifted. We have entered an era of accountability in which results from standardised tests drive instructional decisions. Because of regional mandates, many teachers think they have little choice but to toe the testing line, which often minimises children's voices.

Today I'm worried. I'm worried because I know too many classrooms where mini-lessons begin with "seed" stories that germinate from laminated watermelons, predetermined conferences that always start with a compliment and end with a next step, and, if it's included at all, an author's chair or sharing time entirely driven by the teacher to reinforce a point they made during the mini-lesson. Rarely do children reflect on their writing. And if they do, it's often to fulfil a teaching agenda rather than a learner's agenda. When did packaged programs and Pinterest replace children as the

driving force of instruction? When did everything start to look the same?

I'm in the midst of a mid-career reflection, looking back on my career as a teacher in Early Learning to university classrooms but also looking forward to how we might be able to re-energise writing instruction. A quote from one of my favourite writers, Dr Maya Angelou, often repeats in my mind: "Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better."

In 1997, at the age of 21, I graduated from my undergraduate primary education program and accepted a job as a Year 2 teacher. In my undergraduate program I never had a class in teaching writing to F-5 students. I struggled in my first few months as a classroom teacher. I had been assigned a challenging group of students – maybe because I was the newbie, maybe because I was a man – and relied on scripted curriculums, placed children in the same texts despite their disinterest and chose the topics for their writing, all attempts to control the classroom and ultimately the students. I thought the road to knowledge had to be paved entirely by me. Boy, was I mistaken.

It soon became clear that I was floundering, so I began to educate myself. I went to workshops (one hosted by Lucy Calkins), read the work of writing researchers and began to discover a path towards teaching that changed my instructional ways. Writing, more than any other subject, brought me into my students' lives. Story after story, memoir after memoir, informational text after informational text taught me new things about my students I *needed* to learn. And when I listened, I changed as a teacher. Here's the biggest lesson I learned:

To teach children, you must *know* them. To know them, they must reveal. To reveal, they must feel safe and secure. To feel safe and secure, they need agency. To have agency, they must have choices. When they choose their writing topics, children's lives unfold onto their pages. *We* are educated by the young voices and bold choices of our F-5 writers.

Like many teachers today who worry about teaching writing, I gave prompts for writing. I didn't listen much to my students. Confering? I thought that was my time to mark the work piled up on my desk. When I did mark, I looked entirely at conventions, not meaning. I was proud when all the writing looked the same. I thought the goal was standardisation, not individual expression. My lessons were prescribed – proudly ripped from the teacher's edition of a textbook telling me exactly *what* to teach and *when* to teach it. Jeez, I spent a couple of years as a lousy writing teacher. And the guilt of this instructional malpractice weighs on me still.

Over the last 10 years I've spent two or three days a week in Early Learning to Year

5 classrooms during the time their teachers taught writing. I spent one day a week in classrooms where the students were mostly affluent, mostly white and always fed. I spent another day in classrooms where the students were financially poor, entirely minority, often hungry and aching to be treated with respect. One day I'd read children's writing about having holidays in grand hotels; the next day I'd read children's writing about living in run-down hotels. But no matter where the children came from, they all had one powerful shared need: they all wanted to be heard. And in this era in which tests have the loudest voices, isn't it about time for students to reclaim some voice for themselves?

In classrooms where I've spent time, I've wondered about these questions:

- What happens when students (not planned teaching points) lead writing conferences?
- What happens when students (not teachers) guide response at the author's chair?
- What happens when students (not tests) determine what they learn through reflection and self-evaluation?
- What happens when students (not prescribed curriculums) lead the types of mini-lessons that need to be taught?
- Finally, what happens when teachers take all this knowledge from reflective learners and create the conditions – the physical and psychological spaces – in which students learn?

This book focuses on what happens when empowered *writers* direct the *writer's* workshop. In this book I tell *their* stories – those powerful stories that can come only from *authentic* classroom spaces where children are doing the important work of revealing their lives on the page. And, in telling their stories, I retell what I've learned in my teaching journey – a journey that is probably quite similar to yours.

In this book, we'll tour real classrooms where students set the writing agenda and drive with guidance from their teachers. We take this journey together across a familiar highway – the writer's workshop. Nancie Atwell (1998), Lucy Calkins (1994), Donald Graves ([1983] 2003), Ralph Fletcher and Joann Portalupi (2001), Regie Routman (2004), Jane Hansen ([1985] 2005), Katie Wood Ray (2001) and many other remarkable educators have laid the asphalt, painted the lines and given us directions on how to travel this highway. I'm not interested in repaving those roads. Instead, this book focuses on what students have done and can do when given the opportunity to drive the workshop – and what we can learn from the decisions they make as writers. It's about how these

young voices and their bold choices can help us find our way as their teachers.

This journey will unfold in five chapters:

### *Chapter 1 - Conferring: Writers Take the Wheel*

I begin this book focused on conferring because it's the most important interaction that takes place between writers and their teachers. When we talk with students, they instruct *us*. Many teachers are hesitant about this aspect of the workshop for varied reasons: fear of the unknown, discomfort about what should be talked about and uneasiness with facilitating individualised instruction within a whole classroom of writers. But when we listen intently to students, ask questions about their writing and learn about them as writers, we are doing the important work of helping writers become self-reflective. In this chapter we listen in on various F-5 conferring sessions. We hear what students say, what teachers say in return and what they learn from each other as a result. When we confer, we need to allow writers to take the wheel and steer.

### *Chapter 2 - The Author's Chair: Writers Navigate the Response*

The author's chair within a writer's workshop is an opportunity for the young writer to set the response agenda – to tell the class, “This is what I need from you as readers”. That response may, indeed, be in the form of a compliment. But it could also be a call for ideas, a plea for revision suggestions, a yearning for validation and a need for connection. In an author's chair, one writer shares her work and asks the class to offer feedback. As the child shares, everyone learns. In this chapter, we learn how the author's chair is a space for learning, not just for the author but for the other students and the teacher as well.

### *Chapter 3 - Reflection: Writers Ponder the Journey*

When we give writers the opportunity to reflect on their learning, we see a record of what our students value as learners. When writers reflect, they are able to name their learning, examine how they meet their writing goals and set future expectations for themselves. In this chapter, I show ways in which writers self-evaluate through reflection. When they are given voice in this process, a more complete picture of their learning emerges.

## Chapter 4 - Mini-Lessons: Writers Determine the Detours

When writers drive the workshop, our instructional decisions depend on the trails they blaze with their writing. Too often, we create these trails for our writers by planning lessons before we know their strengths and needs. We've forged a path of instruction too rigid to allow the detours our students need us to make. In this chapter, we learn how to allow our students, not packaged curriculums, to guide our instructional decisions.

## Chapter 5 - Conditions: Teachers Create Smooth Writing Experiences

Writers write with passion when teachers create conditions for smooth driving. Writers need *time* to drive, *choice* in driving style and destination, supportive *response* that propels them forward, *demonstrations* of effective processes and products, high *expectations* from their teachers and for themselves, a *room structure* that creates safe physical and psychological spaces, and the opportunity to *self-evaluate* what they value about their learning. In this final chapter, we discover the important role we play in creating a classroom space where we are co-drivers of the curriculum with our young writers.

In Chapters 1–4, I focus on the components of the writer's workshop. I include snippets of stories from real classrooms and describe practical ways you might embed these components within your own classrooms. Each of these chapters contains a section of guiding beliefs – a list of belief statements I use to ground my teaching practice. I also include a section of frequently asked questions (FAQs) towards the end of these chapters. These are common questions teachers ask me in classes, at conferences or when I do work in schools. Finally, I include a Digital Diversion in Chapters 1–4 to help you see possibilities for using digital tools within your classroom.

Chapter 5, which focuses on the conditions teachers create, does not contain these sidebars because it offers a more holistic view of writer's workshop rather than an in-depth discussion of workshop components. Chapter 5 revisits the important foundational work of Donald Graves and offers in-depth descriptions of how teachers have embedded his conditions within their classrooms.

Allowing our students to control the decision-making can be scary. I remember when I was a learner driver in secondary school. I was 16 years old, driving a manual Subaru station wagon and my mother was a wreck sitting next to me. Every couple of minutes she would throw her hands up on the dashboard – thinking her skinny arms would somehow stop an impending collision. Or she would vigorously pump the

imaginary brake on her passenger side, hoping, somehow, that the force of her foot would stop the car. Over time, as I got better, her anxiety eased and she began to trust my ability to drive. I've seen this happen in classrooms as teachers give more choice and voice to young writers; their nerves ease as they see their students making good decisions and learning to trust their instincts.

Together now, we'll observe as students drive us around the workshop. Occasionally we'll give directions, hit the brakes and change the radio station. Mostly, I hope we'll be able to just enjoy the ride together and reflect on how fortunate we are to be in the car with such interesting drivers, exploring an open road, taking in unexpected sights on an occasional detour and learning along the way.