

CELEBRATING WRITERS

*From Possibilities
Through to Publication*

Ruth **Ayres**
with Christi **Overman**

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CHAPTER 1

EXPANDING WRITING CELEBRATIONS

*It is difficult
to get the news from poems,
yet men die miserably every day
for lack
of what is found there.*

– William Carlos Williams

Mason slouched in the corner of the classroom, doing his best to make his man-sized year-five body disappear. We were a few days into a new writing project – nonfiction videos. Fellow teacher Keith Bollman was anchoring writing workshops with humanities and social sciences lessons. Earlier in the week, students selected a place, and now they were finding ways to angle their research toward a fascinating topic.

Mason was hunkered in the corner, notebook open, pencil at attention, staring into space. I settled next to him, leaning against the cabinets. “How’s it going?” I asked.

Mason shrugged, his eyes droopy at 8:30 a.m.

“Do you want some help?” I pushed a little harder.

“I just need some time to think.”

I was tempted to force Mason into making a list of ideas. I wanted him to talk to me about his chosen place. I expected him to do something.

Instead, I nodded. “Okay,” I said, standing up, “I’ll come back later.”

Mason spent the rest of writing workshop in the corner. Other than drawing two tiny doodles in the corner of his notebook page, he didn’t move.

Sometimes the things left unsaid are more powerful than ten teaching points put together. I didn’t tell Mason to brainstorm and write down some ideas. I didn’t tell him to talk to other writers. I didn’t tell him to check out the books around the room. I let Mason have some space. Sometimes space, although difficult to give, is best.

Like many of our students, life is hard in Mason’s house. Sometimes our students’ problems make it hard for us to breathe. The classroom becomes stuffy with the reality of life outside of school. The problems are big.

I think about William Carlos Williams’s words that opened this chapter, coming back to them as I think deeply about celebration. I must admit, when I first began teaching I thought celebration was fluff. It was the cherry on top, the bonus day in a writing workshop. It wasn’t the serious business of writing. Williams compares poetry to news, and then twists the words, making us realise even if poetry isn’t “serious business”, it is still essential to life.

The next day Mason sat, hunkered in the same spot, intent over the tablet in his lap. I checked in with him again. “What are you working on?” I asked.

“Research,” he said.

I looked at the screen on his knees. He was on YouTube, searching videos. “What are you researching?”

Mason tapped the screen, and a video began to play. He turned down the volume. I expected another one-word answer.

“Yesterday, I decided I wanted to learn about aeroplanes. There’s a big aerospace museum here. They’ve got lots of videos on YouTube about the planes.”

I nodded, staying silent. Mason continued, “So I’m thinking I’ll highlight three planes from the museum for my video. I’m interested in planes and probably other people are too. Can that be my angle?”

“Sounds good. Do you need anything to help you get started?”

Mason shook his head. His notebook was opened to the page with the previous day’s tiny doodles, his pencil waiting to put marks

on the lines. The tablet was balanced on his knees. “I’m just going to watch these videos today.”

Sometimes leaving things unsaid is more difficult than knowing what to say. I wanted to tell him to make a list of possible planes to learn about. I wanted to tell him to set up a notes page in his notebook. I wanted to tell him to look at sites other than YouTube. Instead, I smiled at Mason and said, “I hope you get a lot of ideas from your research today.”

Like many of our students, Mason doesn’t believe in himself as a writer. For years as an instructional coach, I’ve watched him try to disappear in writing workshop, making tiny doodles in the corners of pages. The promise of a big hoopla of a party once the writing is finished isn’t going to inspire him to write. He’s not that kind of kid. He needs more.

During the share session at the end of workshop time, I invited students to share their work as researchers. Mason sat on the edge of the circle, too big to be comfortable on the floor, too compliant to ask to sit in a chair and too passive to be a part of the group. I noticed his doodles remained the same, but he’d jotted a few words, a list, some notes. He kept his head down.

“Mason,” I asked, “do you want to share what you learned through your research today?” He shrugged. I waited. Smiled. Waited. Nudged: “I see you have a list in your notebook.”

Mason pushed his thick curly hair out of his eyes and said, “There’s a lot of planes at a museum here, but I thought these three were the most interesting. So I wrote them down.”

“What else did you write?” Chandler asked.

Everyone waited for Mason to respond. “You know, just the interesting things about the planes so I don’t forget.”

“Maybe I’ll do that too,” Chandler said.

Sometimes we catch a ghost of a smile and know something worthy just happened. I wanted to gush over Mason’s chicken scratches on notebook pages. I wanted to give him a high five. I wanted to give him a chocolate bar. Instead, I treated him like every other writer in the community. He did the work expected of a writer. I chose to respect Mason and agreed with Chandler. “That’s a good

why we have to talk with our Ireland “Tweeps” in the morning, because they are getting ready to leave school for the afternoon. They are learning new vocabulary from their friends in Canada. They are talking about snow with students in Africa. Even more importantly, they are learning how much the kids in these other places are like them. They realise they are learning the same things. They share their stories with one another and realise their feelings transcend continents. A child can sit in my rural classroom, never leaving the state, and connect with people across the globe.

Through online spaces, students also have a degree of access to authors that before was impossible. If we have a question for an author, we can tweet them, check their blog for reflections on their writing lives or follow them on Facebook. Authors are more accessible than ever before. This gives us an opportunity to use them for mentors when it comes to the writing process, not just the final products.

One year I helped lead an author study of Mo Willems in Deborah Nelson’s foundation-year classroom. Throughout the unit, I collected video clips of students working and wrote down snippets of their thoughts about writing as they gleaned them from studying Mo Willems. As a final celebration, I arranged the clips together in a video that documented our learning. We shared a link to our YouTube video via Mo Willems’s Twitter username, @The_Pigeon. As we tweeted from the interactive whiteboard, students giggled and giggled at the prospect of Mo seeing their video. Within an hour @The_Pigeon retweeted our video celebration. The class cheered, ecstatic that Mo had “joined” their writing celebration.

Not only did Mo join our celebration, but so did parents, grandparents, relatives and friends. Since the video is on YouTube, people from around the globe were able to celebrate with us. You can celebrate with us too; just take a look at the note that we sent home to families (Figure 3.1). (If you have a smartphone or tablet, you’ll be able to scan the QR code and go directly to the video.)

Facebook users, so it makes sense to create a classroom Facebook page. This allows us to meet parents on their turf, making it easier for them to be involved with our classrooms.

Writing celebrations can be extended to Facebook when we post photos and status updates that share responses, reflections and rejoicing during the celebration. On Facebook, we can also share links to blog posts that highlight writing celebrations.

Skype (or Google Hangout)

Skype provides an opportunity to talk face-to-face with people in other places. We can Skype with classrooms in our own area, or in another state, or on another continent. It is essential to plan ahead and determine a time and topic for the Skype conversation. Through Twitter, Christi connected with a classroom in Ireland. They arranged to have a transatlantic writing celebration. Each classroom posted their writing on their blogs. Then they offered responses through comments. They shared reflections via Twitter. Finally, each classroom put together a box of lollies to send across the globe. The rejoicing portion of the celebration took place as they taste-tested lollies from the other country. Everything was organised, planned and implemented through social networks. Ultimately, they Skyped with one another, finally getting to “meet” face-to-face.

Many authors offer free Skype visits with classrooms. Check out the list of authors offering Skype visits online at Skype an Author Network (<http://skypeanauthor.wikifoundry.com/>). By organising a Skype visit with an author who is a writing mentor, the energy for writing is increased. Skype extends writing celebrations and gives students experiences that would be impossible without this social media.

Google Hangout is an alternative to Skype. It is easy to use and allows you to “meet” with more than one person at a time. As long as you have a Google account, you have access to Google Hangouts.

YouTube

YouTube offers a place to share videos. You can upload videos of your own and then share with others the links to the videos on