Cultivating Writers

Elevate your writing instruction beyond the skills to ignite the will

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Once upon a time, children roamed their neighborhoods, played on quiet streets, and ran through fenceless backyards with their gangs. Kick the Can, Hide and Seek, Red Light/Green Light, Mother May I?, Red Rover, and What Time Is It, Mr. Wolf? were just some of the games generated, organized, managed, and orchestrated by kids. Play occurred spontaneously, rules were negotiated, problems were addressed on the spot, and games ended when Mom hollered out the door or streetlights came on. But times started to change and, before we knew it, play was forever changed. The toy market exploded and became more financially accessible to families. Children's TV programs erupted beyond Saturday mornings. And organized sport, clubs, and lessons became mainstream. The authentic, organic, choice-driven play of yesteryear seemed to disappear. Now here we are in 2020, and staff rooms are filled with teacher laments about children unable to play without adult direction, guidance, and supervision. Kids now seem to be unable to:

- generate ideas
- create something from nothing
- access the materials around them as resources
- use what they know to develop and organize themselves
- carry out a plan

To play, they must have the proper equipment, clear rules, someone keeping score, a referee, and a reward or trophy for the winner. Please don’t get us wrong—children learn valuable life lessons and skills from organized sports and activities. We wonder if, in our quest to keep children safe, engaged, stimulated, and active, the pendulum has shifted so far that there is no longer time and space for authentic, organic, child-driven play. Incidentally, research now indicates the need for unstructured play that enables children to create, explore, and navigate their world independently:

"Play nourishes every aspect of children's development… Play develops the foundation of intellectual, social, physical, and emotional skills necessary for success in
school and life. It "paves the way for learning." (The Canadian Council on Learning, 2016, pg. 2)

What we need is to strike a balance between the two scenarios: structured and supervised versus organic and free.

This evolution of play has connections to writing instruction. In the 1990s, Donald Graves, Don Murray, Lucy Calkins, Regie Routman, and others revolutionized our understanding of how students can see themselves as writers and are compelled to write prolifically. Their student-centred approach to writing instruction placed students in the driver's seat of idea generation, determining the format they would write, who their audience would be, and what pieces would be taken to publication. Students discovered

I have something to say, my voice has value, and the decisions on how I say it are mine. My teacher is a support who guides me as a reader of my writing. They help me identify my voice and purpose; draw attention to areas of strength, places to clarify and improve; offer timely and specific feedback to consider as I develop as a writer.

Writing was authentic, organic, and choice-driven. Teachers taught the writer, not the writing.

But the winds of change started to blow within school boards and across the country. In all curriculum areas, the focus became standards, outcomes, and expectations that could be measured. The mighty gusts led to the emergence of a results-based system driven by testing scores. Our attention was thrust onto the expectations and skill-driven instruction and pulled away from student-driven writing environments. In the literacy world, the focus became creating a skilful writer who understood
• form (descriptive, narrative, persuasive, expository, etc.)
• format (story, poem, letter, report, etc.)
• writing traits (ideas, organization, sentence fluency, word choice, conventions, presentation)
• process (brainstorming, drafting, revising, editing, publishing)
• craft techniques

However, in our quest to do better for our students and to meet testing expectations, we suddenly became overzealous about teaching writing skills. We taught the writing, not the writer. The teacher had the lead in this production and the student took on a minor role. The teacher had agency and ownership over writing decisions; the student was expected to merely follow the script. As a result, a new kind of writer seemed to emerge in our classrooms—the skilful writer who was compliant and capable as long as they were given very specific instructions, guidelines, and parameters.

In conversation with colleagues, we discovered that we were not the only ones who were beginning to notice the shift taking place among our writers. Students were becoming more skilful in crafting text, but appeared to lack the desire to write freely or derive joy from this worthwhile endeavor. As teachers, we began to reflect on our own practice and reminisce about the days when we were more focused on developing a writer's sense of self, voice, ability to see ideas everywhere, and, above all, compulsion to write it down! We realized that we let go of critical practices that gave life to authentic writing and adopted a more formulaic
approach that stifled students’ abilities and drive to be independent writers. In our quest to create proficient, skilful, success-criteria-driven writers, had we left no time and space for authentic, organic, personalized writing? The self-driven writer seemed to disappear. It became apparent that we needed to address and invest in developing the will to write, along with skills. After all, what good are the skills if you do not have the will?

We longed for our students to see writing as a rewarding experience, to appreciate its potential as a pastime, to carry an enthusiasm for writing beyond the classroom. We knew these were worthwhile aspirations to have. What teacher doesn’t dream for this to happen for their students? However, we were acutely aware that there were obstacles we would have to contend with in our quest to turn students on to writing. For example we wondered if our expectations and the text models we provided were too high, too soon. Did this contribute to our students feeling dissatisfaction and disappointment with their drafts? Some students enter our classrooms with a negative attitude about writing and their own ability, due to an overemphasis on writing conventions (e.g., spelling, grammar, punctuation, legibility). Others suffer from the misconception that, because writing takes effort on their part and requires revision, they are not capable. It’s as if students expect their first draft to be their only draft, and having to revisit a piece of writing is evidence that they are not proficient writers. On the other hand, some students see little value in writing pursuits in their jam-packed schedules; some are glued to their phones and consider it an appendage.

But we were willing to tackle, tear down, or even catapult away these obstacles in our mission to create willful writers. Transferring and turning writing ambitions into reality meant our explicit instruction had to directly address these goals. Skill-based writing instruction was simply not enough to ignite a writing passion within students.

In this book we offer classroom-based solutions that have been developed, tested, and refined over a number of years in classrooms. It is built around six essential steps:

1. Develop Your Writing Life
2. Tap into Your Students’ Lives
3. Model the Habits of a Writer
4. Make the Why of Writing Visible
5. Provide What Students Need to Write
6. Nourish the Will to Write

Using these practices, you, too, can take writing instruction beyond an emphasis on teaching the skills to address the will. By amalgamating sound pedagogy from the past and present you will equip yourself to create a writing environment that merges these two critical components.

We have the responsibility, the obligation, and the duty to create an environment in which kids flourish into writers who have the skill and the will. In Cultivating Writers you will discover how to foster writing engagement through an active writing community. You will reflect on the way in which you currently teach the will of writing, and be inspired and motivated to incorporate new ideas and strategies into your practice—to do what you do even better, just as we have!
Decluttering Writing Instruction

Do you remember a TV program from the early 2000s called *Clean Sweep*? It focused on decluttering your home, and showed home owners sorting their items into three distinct piles: Keep, Sell, and Toss. And now there are many similar shows: *Clean House*, *Mission Organization*, *Master the Mess*, and the Netflix sensation *Tidying Up with Marie Kondo*. If you’re like us, you are amazed and sometimes appalled by the amount of stuff people accumulate and allow to dominate their spaces. However, by the show’s end, we are looking around our own homes with a critical eye to cleaning up and clearing out.

What should we keep and what can we toss? These are challenging decisions that require a measuring stick. For Marie Kondo, the question when deciding what to keep is always “Does this spark joy?”

Mary

When I had to determine what items I would keep following my father Dan’s passing, the task was exceptionally challenging. The decisions were wrought with emotion, memory, and connection. Not all items could be kept, nor were important to keep. The essential question when making the choice was “What kindles a treasured memory of me and my father?” With this question at the forefront, selecting treasured items came to mind instantaneously. My father’s Tilley hat, which he never went anywhere without, always perched on his head during his regular visits on my front porch, was definitely a keeper. It now sits prominently and proudly in my kitchen for all to see as a daily reminder. From his treasured Santa Claus collection, I selected an old-fashioned rendering of the jolly old fellow that reminded me of Christmases past. Lastly, my children requested the carved wooden checkerboard on which games were played with their Papa. Treasured keepsakes all.

As teachers we are routinely faced with the question of what to keep and what to let go. We accumulate a lot of “stuff”: the curriculum, school-board
expectations, initiatives, programs, lesson frameworks, instructional strategies, resources—the list is endless. And like that of a homeowner, our spaces and minds can become cluttered and muddled. We need to give ourselves permission to stop, reflect, evaluate, modify, and let go, with our decisions based on sound research and pedagogy and our classroom practice. By merging these two fields of understanding, we can make informed decisions in the best interest of our students on what we should keep and what we can let go.

These are the exact questions we asked ourselves when reflecting on our writing programs. The work of Gail Tompkins and Lori Jamison Rog highlighted the stages of the writing process and the various writing forms/formats, while Ruth Culham brought the writing traits to life and offered mini-lessons to teach them explicitly. Ralph Fletcher, Lynn Dorfman and Ann Cappelli, along with Elizabeth Hale, illuminated the importance of lessons focusing on craft techniques. We used their tangible lessons and activities with our students and ensured we provided ample opportunities for practice. Our writing conferences provided the evidence that our students were becoming skilful writers due to our explicit instruction.

When we took the time to stop and critically examine our classroom practices through the lens of writing, our observations indicated that most students were able to
• follow the writing process to produce grade-level text
• identify the forms of writing (e.g., narrative, descriptive, expository, persuasive)
• include the specific features of various formats in their writing
• craft pieces that utilized the traits of writing
• employ a variety of craft techniques

We were pleased to see students who were capable, skilful writers. Our writing instruction had met its mark. Bull's eye!

However, to be transparent, we were disheartened to also discover students who
• were not excited to write ("Ugh! Do we have to write today?")
• didn't talk proudly about the text they were writing ("It's not that good.")
• were not aware of their writing territories (i.e., ideas) ("I don't know what to write about.")
• found free writing overwhelming and challenging ("What do you want me to write? Aren't you going to tell me?")
• were not invested in revising their work ("It's fine just the way it is. I like my first draft.")
• were unaware of the rewards and value of writing in their life ("I only write at school and when given an assignment.")

It was clear that many of our capable, competent writers were the farthest thing from passionate writers, that their will to write was lacklustre or even non-existent. They didn't seem excited about writing. They didn't derive joy from writing freely. They weren't actively on the lookout for their next writing idea. They were simply going through the motions to meet the assignment criteria. Think about your own classroom—does this sound familiar?

In our travels across Canada and the United States, attending and presenting at various conferences, we have heard teachers express similar concerns regarding writing will. In fact, Ontario's Education Quality and Accountability Office
Underlying Causes for the Lack of Writing Will

Too Many Expectations

In our province, the Ministry of Education outlines overall and specific expectations for each subject area: Mathematics, Language, Science, Social Studies, Music, Drama, Dance, Visual Arts, Physical Education, and Health; Grades 4–8 have French as well. Because the curriculum is so immense, teachers strive to make every moment count and to ensure that their instruction is directly linked to curriculum. In Language alone, there are 75 specific expectations. Of the 25 that specifically target writing, none—zip, zero, zilch—address student interest and motivation to write, nor do any explore the benefits and value of writing. Every single one focuses on students acquiring the skills.