

Teaching Writers through a Unit of Study Approach

It is easy to *assign* but difficult to *teach* writing. It becomes even more difficult to teach when there is only a single period for both writing and reading. This was the challenge that Barb, Joe, and Claudia wanted to investigate when we discussed ways to better help students develop as writers.

Together we explored how to provide authentic, inquiry-based learning opportunities that simultaneously supported students' development as writers and realistically worked within a 43-minute period. We found that teaching within a unit of study format (Ray, 2006; Kittle, 2008) supported these goals. In this article, we share how we supported writers throughout a memoir unit of study and why we believe this approach nurtures students as writers and works within unavoidable time constraints.

Factors Involved in Implementing a Unit of Study

What Is a Unit of Study?

A unit of study offers a predictable format of instructional practices for studying writing. It is based on a two-fold goal: students learn about a product (such as a memoir) or writing process (such as revision) while also learning how to study writing in general. Following this framework, teachers *gather* examples of texts that help students better understand the genre under study; teachers *expect* students to write within this genre; teachers *immerse* students in reading and talking about anchor texts and engage in *close*

study of certain texts, thus helping students to analyze how these texts are written; and, finally, students and teachers write *under the influence* and produce something similar to the texts originally studied (Ray, 2006). In addition to the decision to implement a unit of study as a systematic way to study writing, we had to determine how to structure time for writing and explore issues of student choice.

Establishing Time for Writing

Faced with the challenge of teaching reading and writing within a single period, we decided that within each school quarter, 3–4 weeks would be devoted to writing. Reading would be put “on hold,” although students read 30 minutes for homework daily. During writing weeks, the teachers followed a writing workshop procedure wherein the students had a mini-lesson on writing, were given ample writing time, and were allotted time at the end of class to talk about their writing (Atwell, 1998).

The Importance of Choice

Critical to supporting students' growth as writers is the need for students to select their own topics (Atwell, 1998; Ray, 2006). Students deserve choice as writers. In thinking about the importance of choice, Barb shared:

Students have to own their ideas, they have to have a personal connection to their writing—otherwise their voice does not come through. You can't fake passion. This topic has to be something they want to write, it is a hunger almost for them to get these words on paper. If that is lacking, then their writing is not nearly as good.

Middle school students have rich, busy lives,

and they have hundreds of experiences worthy of committing to paper. In one class alone, students wrote memoirs about sports (softball, dirt biking, dancing), first times (going to Florida, riding a roller coaster, being falsely accused), death of a cousin, a Bat Mitzvah, and a grandparent diagnosed with Alzheimer's, while other students explored ideas behind the words, such as *family* and *community*. This is the reason for choice. No single teacher-directed topic could speak to the truth of these writers.

Why a Unit of Study?

Writers need time to write. Authors don't just write when they feel like it. They exercise their seat muscle—that is, they sit in their chairs and write (Murray, 1999). Students need to write daily to gain writing momentum. In addition, choice is an important staple in teaching writers. Writing is hard work; students must be invested in their topic to “give their all” to their writing. And writers look to other writers to see how they deal with writing challenges; their new writing is often influenced by what they notice and study in others' work. Embedded in the unit of study is support for all of these critical factors in order to help students live more authentically as writers. In the remainder of the article, we provide a closer look at the structure of the unit of study and specific teaching decisions to help students develop their voices as writers.

The Essential Structure

Gathering Texts

At the core of this work in the unit of study is gathering anchor texts that become co-teachers in the classroom. Before students can write thoughtfully in a particular genre, they need to *know* that genre. They need to read high-quality examples so that they know the feel of that genre and the work it can do in the world. As a teacher, you only have to write a little bit better than your students (Ray, 2006), but you have to be an avid gatherer of good writing. These texts show (not tell) students what good writing looks and sounds

like. It is with these texts that students learn to examine and study how writing in memoir is done well.

Students read and discuss these texts, analyzing to see how authors tell their stories. The goal is for students to look to these pieces when crafting their own writing. Initially 5–6 texts are helpful. We use passages from books, such as *The Glass Castle* (Walls, 2006) and *Marshfield Dreams* (Fletcher, 2005), and from magazines. We share our own and our colleagues' memoirs. However, we have found using students' past examples to be extremely helpful. Studying fellow eighth graders' examples makes the writing task seem less daunting, “more doable,” as students often know the past authors and are excited to study something peers wrote. NCTE's National Gallery of Writing (<http://galleryofwriting.org>) is also a great source for student writing that could serve as anchor texts.

Expectations for Writing

From the first day, students are aware they will write their own memoir piece. We help students think about experiences worthy of capturing on paper. To support their thinking about memoir possibilities, students create heart maps (Heard, 1998), draw neighborhood maps (Fletcher, 2007), free-write to questions (What was a time you were brokenhearted? When is a moment you were 100% happy?), and make lists (first times, favorite objects). Students need topics that matter to them. We confer with students to help them narrow their ideas to a few manageable options.

Immersion and Close Study

Together we read and study anchor texts, noting the structure of the piece (how the author gets from beginning to end) and ways with words (how the author uses language, words, phrases, tone, etc. within the piece) (Ray, 2006). Often

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these noticings are charted to serve as concrete reminders of possible choices for writers. For example, in “My Sink-or-Swim Summer” by Jerry O’Connell (2007), students noted specific nouns

and places (7-Eleven, *Baywatch*), explanations of unfamiliar lifeguard terms (“torpedo rescue”), sharings of inner thoughts, uses and elaborations of a popular reference throughout the piece (*Rocky IV*), a humorous tone, and a powerful reflective ending.

Students also study other texts while engaging in this close analysis of writing. Learning to “read like a writer”—to notice how writers write—helps students learn how to help themselves when they run into writing difficulties (Ray, 2006; Smith, 1998). If unsure about how to begin, students can return to anchor texts in order to study how those authors began their pieces and to determine if something they notice would work for them. For example, if the passage of time is important to a student’s memoir, revisiting anchor texts can remind them about how different authors accomplished that in their memoirs.

Mini-lessons

In addition to immersion and close study, teachers must teach specific things based on students’ noticing or genre requirements. The mini-lesson content is dependent on what we feel is most significant for students to know and is also based on data from common and formative assessments. It is imperative that these quick lessons are targeted and purposeful, as whole-group instruction time is limited. The sequence of lessons often follows what students will need as they write their pieces. For example, each teacher begins with topic se-

lection and then addresses writing techniques, such as leads, organization, imagery, sensory detail, intentional fragments, vivid verbs, flashbacks, and writing with emotional hearts.

Critical to the teaching of mini-lessons is the use of concrete writing examples. For example, for a mini-lesson on intentional fragments, Joe gathered examples from the children’s book *Tough Cookie* (Wisniewski, 1999), as well as from YA fiction, former students, and a local newspaper columnist. He created a handout of examples and studied these with his students. They discussed why these examples work and what they offer readers. Students tried out these ideas, playing with intentional fragments to see if this technique would help their writing. For example, Sally tried fragments in her memoir about going to camp:

I remembered the events that happened not so long ago. *The kicking. The screaming. The crying. Camp!* A place with no air-conditioning and lots of bugs. What kind of civilized people would go somewhere like that? What kind of parents would send their child to that prison?

While intentional fragments are not specific to memoirs, this writing technique is used in memoirs and provides students with a means to convey their message.

At the same time, mini-lessons specific to memoir are also presented. For example, to help students understand the emotional heart of their piece—the part that answers “Why is this memory important to share?”—Barb helped students see their choices when crafting their emotional hearts. Do they want to shock the reader? End humorously? End with emotion? She used examples to show how other authors wrote their emotional hearts so that students could study and borrow these ideas for their pieces. Following this lesson, Megan decided she wanted the reader to experience the raw emotion she felt when she took home her new puppy. She wrote:

As I walked out of the door that day, holding her minute, warm body tenderly in my arms, I felt a rush a love, overwhelming and enveloping me like a warm wave of gentle flowing water. A feeling of joy slowly spreading throughout every limb in my body cen-

tered and focused entirely on her. I think that that emotion, that sensation of wanting her to be perfect and wanting to help mold her tiny personality, was similar to what a new mother might have felt carrying her new baby out of the hospital. I *knew* that feeling now.

Studying other writers provided Megan with a way to help her convey her feelings to her readers. The overarching goal is to provide students with options and choices that will allow them to be intentional in their writing, to think about what they want to say and what they want the reader to experience, and then to deliberately craft their pieces to accomplish those goals.

Writing under the Influence

Students craft their own pieces while reading and studying anchor texts, being sure to consider and apply what they notice in those texts as well as what they learn in their reading and mini-lessons. During this time, we confer with students, providing individualized and differentiated instruction. The students are expected to pose a specific question about their writing, going beyond the generic “Is this good?” Students indicate that they would like to confer by writing their name on the board. We try to keep the conferences brief, typically less than 5 minutes per student. Their question helps us keep focused on one major issue that is keeping the student from moving forward. We also use blogs to confer online. Multiple students enter the conversation about a writing dilemma, and students learn from reading other conversations. Joe’s students pose 1–2 questions on their rough drafts, and he provides written feedback. Doing this helps students think specifically about craft (Do I have enough imagery in the second paragraph? Does my repetition in the conclusion seem forced?), and it allows the teacher time to provide authentic, targeted feedback.

Conclusion

The unit of study offers students many benefits, but mainly it helps them begin to establish a “habit of mind” about writing (Ray, 2006). In effect,

students learn a systematic way to help themselves learn more about writing. This format is true to the work of professional writers. Countless authors have written books about the craft of writing, describing their own routines and habits (e.g., Jane Yolen, Stephen King). Across these examples is a unifying pattern of reading widely and often as a way to inspire their own writing and as a means for studying how others write. The unit of study offers students an authentic and predictable structure, one that closely approximates what writers do beyond the school walls. At the end of a unit, students are able to speak specifically about writing techniques as well as analyze their work with direction and focus, experiences they can draw upon repeatedly as they develop as writers. This way of studying writing helps *teach* writers and provides them with an intentional way to continue teaching themselves after the unit is over.

In effect, students learn a systematic way to help themselves learn more about writing.

CONNECTIONS FROM READWRITETHINK

Memoir Writing through the Study of *The Giver*

The unit of study example shared in the article was on memoirs. The ReadWriteThink.org lesson plan **Memories Matter: *The Giver* and Descriptive Writing Memoirs** tightly integrates personal writing, research, and thematic response to literature. Students discuss the importance of having a recorded history of humanity and gain a deeper understanding of the horror of Jonas’s dystopian society in Lois Lowry’s *The Giver*. This understanding generates a keen interest in and context for the descriptive writing of students’ own histories. Students gather ideas from several sources, including their own memories, interviews, and photographs, and then write their own descriptive memoirs.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/memories-matter-giver-descriptive-13.html>

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Submission Information for Student to Student

The Student to Student feature of *Voices from the Middle* has been a popular and motivating element of the journal since its inception. Wendy Ranck-Buhr, principal at the San Diego Cooperative Charter School, serves as department editor for this feature. She invites teachers from across the nation and the world to submit their students' book reviews. We know from teacher feedback that these reviews motivate students to write with care, help readers pick out new books, and generally support our students as readers and writers.

Please send all Student to Student submissions to vmstudenttostudent@gmail.com. Keep in mind that reviews should be 200 words (including bibliographic information), the student's grade and school must be identified, and the book reviewed should not have appeared in *VM* within the last three years. (For an easy reference, check the annual indexes appearing in every May issue, both print and online.)

We hope you will encourage your students to write reviews for consideration. Publication has made a difference in so many student lives!
