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ABSTRACT

Six teacher-researchers (three elementary school teachers, one teacher of hearing-impaired, one Chapter One teacher, and one university researcher) investigated how their membership in a community of writers affected their perceptions of themselves as writers. Three themes emerged in transcriptions of biweekly meetings held over one school year: teachers as researchers, forming a community of learners, and teachers as writers. Findings suggest implications for how the participants structure their whole language classes, particularly writing workshops. These implications suggest changes in how the teacher researchers think about: (1) the writing process; (2) being ready to write; (3) integrating literature and writing; (4) giving and receiving feedback; and (5) classroom communities. (Contains 12 references.) (RS)

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Teacher-Researchers Discover Magic in Forming an Adult Writing Workshop

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NRRC
National Reading Research Center

PERSPECTIVES IN READING RESEARCH NO. 9
Fall 1995

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National Reading Research Center

Teacher-Researchers Discover Magic in Forming an Adult Writing Workshop

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About the National Reading Research Center

The National Reading Research Center (NRRC) is funded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement of the U.S. Department of Education to conduct research on reading and reading instruction. The NRRC is operated by a consortium of the University of Georgia and the University of Maryland College Park in collaboration with researchers at several institutions nationwide.

The NRRC's mission is to discover and document those conditions in homes, schools, and communities that encourage children to become skilled, enthusiastic, lifelong readers. NRRC researchers are committed to advancing the development of instructional programs sensitive to the cognitive, sociocultural, and motivational factors that affect children's success in reading. NRRC researchers from a variety of disciplines conduct studies with teachers and students from widely diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds in pre-kindergarten through grade 12 classrooms. Research projects deal with the influence of family and family-school interactions on the development of literacy; the interaction of sociocultural factors and motivation to read; the impact of literature-based reading programs on reading achievement; the effects of reading strategies instruction on comprehension and critical thinking in literature, science, and history; the influence of innovative group participation structures on motivation and learning; the potential of computer technology to enhance literacy; and the development of methods and standards for alternative literacy assessments.

The NRRC is further committed to the participation of teachers as full partners in its research. A better understanding of how teachers view the development of literacy, how they use knowledge from research, and how they approach change in the classroom is crucial to improving instruction. To further this understanding, the NRRC conducts school-based research in which teachers explore their own philosophical and pedagogical orientations and trace their professional growth.

Dissemination is an important feature of NRRC activities. Information on NRRC research appears in several formats. *Research Reports* communicate the results of original research or synthesize the findings of several lines of inquiry. They are written primarily for researchers studying various areas of reading and reading instruction. The *Perspective Series* presents a wide range of publications, from calls for research and commentary on research and practice to first-person accounts of experiences in schools. *Instructional Resources* include curriculum materials, instructional guides, and materials for professional growth, designed primarily for teachers.

For more information about the NRRC's research projects and other activities, or to have your name added to the mailing list, please contact:

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Teacher-Researchers Discover Magic in Forming an Adult Writing Workshop

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Abstract. *Six teacher-researchers investigated how their membership in a community of writers affected their perceptions of themselves as writers. They describe themes found in transcriptions of biweekly meetings held over one school year: teachers as researchers, forming a community of learners, and teachers as writers.*

A teacher rolls out of bed while suffering from a migraine headache and scribbles furiously in a notebook. Another teacher withdraws over half the balance of her credit union account to pay for a correspondence course that gains her credit toward neither a degree nor recertification. Tears stream down the faces of several teachers as, during a rare outing for lunch in a restaurant, one of them reads aloud to the others.

What force is at work here? What can account for such bizarre and uncharacteristic behaviors? Members of our research team claim that it's magic.

The magic began for us in the spring of 1993 when the National Reading Research Center (NRRC) invited our school to become a member of its School Research Consortia (SRC). Five teachers from our school attended an organizational meeting for prospective members, where we expected to be paired with university professors or doctoral candidates whose interests matched ours and who already had research projects in mind. It turned out that the NRRC, instead of simply placing ourselves and our students at the disposal of researchers from outside our school, intended for us to become teacher-researchers who would conceive, design, carry out, interpret, and report on our very own projects. The

NRRC would provide some structure, funding, and consultation, but the projects were ours.

We found the prospect of becoming teacher-researchers intriguing but also somewhat daunting. We imagined all research to be a tangle of experimental groups and control groups, double-tailed *t*-tests and analyses of variance. We doubted our competence and questioned our willingness to commit ourselves to the effort we knew such a project would require. We did, nevertheless, commit ourselves, because we felt it was important for teachers to take advantage of every opportunity to speak and be heard, to develop a voice, and to establish their credibility concerning educational issues.

Having made the decision to become members of the SRC, it became our responsibility to identify a research question and to design a project. What were our most burning questions concerning literacy learning? What were our most vital concerns?

Formulating a question was difficult, not because we had no concerns, but because we had so many. As we were preparing this project, our school was in its first year of transition to whole language instruction in language arts. All of us were experiencing the sense of dislocation and unease that inevitably accompanies rapid change. One minute we were celebrating our students' accomplishments; the next minute, we were full of doubts about our teaching.

As we searched for the source of these doubts, we began to realize that we felt handicapped by our lack of experience *as students* in reading and writing workshops. Every one of us had had years of experience as students in traditional classrooms, and, as teachers, we had been accustomed to drawing heavily on those experiences. Now, in our restructured whole language classrooms, since not one of us had ever been a student in such a classroom, we found ourselves cut off from an important source of confidence and expertise.

We talked glibly about children claiming membership in a community of learners and how such membership provided strong motivation for language acquisition, skills development, and the evolution of the attitudes and behaviors that lead to lifelong learning. Yet we had no personal experiences to tell us what factors encouraged or inhibited the formation of such communities in our classrooms.

We knew it was important to write with our students (Atwell, 1991; Graves, 1990; Murray, 1985), but we did not know how it felt to offer a piece of writing with which we had struggled, into which we had put our heart and soul, to be critiqued by our peers. We did not know how difficult it might be to offer constructive criticism to a colleague.

Every one of us held an intuitive belief that a teacher who writes is somehow automatically a better teacher of writing, yet we did not consider ourselves writers. The utilitarian writing that we all did in our jobs, the journal writing that some of us did irregularly, even the poems that one of us produced occasionally or the stories that another one of us wrote in secret did not, in our minds, qualify us as "real writers." These intermittent, solitary writing experiences were better than nothing, but we suspected that a more sustained, purposeful, *public* effort was necessary if we were to maximize our effectiveness as writing teachers

and come to understand the effect of writing on our personal and professional lives.

We were aware of writing projects that included classroom teachers (Bay Area, Philadelphia) and of teacher book clubs that were being formed around the country (Flood & Lapp, 1994). We began to imagine ourselves forming a true community of writers and discovering firsthand how such a community evolves, and to what extent and through what mechanisms it motivates and supports the learning of its members. Perhaps, given time, we could learn what teachers who are real writers can offer their students that others cannot.

We therefore formulated the research question: How does membership in a community of writers affect our perceptions of ourselves (1) as writers and (2) as teachers of writing? As tempting as it was to jump immediately into analyzing our teaching in an attempt to address both parts of our question at once, we soon realized that simply proclaiming ourselves writers would not make it so. Our question implied a two-phase study, the first focusing on our growth as writers and our behavior as members of a writing community, and the second focusing on our teaching of writing. We decided to devote an entire school year to Phase 1, organizing an adult writers' workshop and observing and documenting its evolution, since we first had to become writers before we could examine its impact on our teaching. As we launched Phase 1 of our project, our research team consisted of 5 classroom teachers (1 teacher of fifth grade, 2 of fourth grade, 1 of hearing impaired, and 1 of Chapter One) and 1 university researcher who, to the delight of the other researchers, asked permission to join our group shortly after its inception.

Method

The teacher-researchers and the university researcher together constructed all aspects of the study (Klassen & Short, 1992). Our research was designed collaboratively as we acted as co-researchers who formulated research questions, gathered and analyzed data, and reported our findings (Short et al., 1992).

For 5 months, we held biweekly, 2-hr meetings at school. A typical meeting consisted of one or more members reading aloud their personal writing and/or describing their writing experiences; other members responding with encouragement, praise, criticism, advice, or experiences of their own; and the group as a whole attempting to draw generalizations about its experiences and to assess the status of the project. Eventually, in response to a need for more extended periods of time to analyze data, we abandoned the biweekly meetings in favor of bimonthly, day-long retreats away from school. During the morning portion of these retreats, we focused on research; the afternoons were given to sharing and discussing our writing. To compensate for the less frequent group meetings, we assigned ourselves "writing buddies," pairs that met frequently in order to continue to support each other as writers.

We collected data consisting of participants' personal writing, including journal entries, audiotapes of group meetings and retreats, and transcripts from participants' presentations at education conferences. The

audiotapes were transcribed for data analysis. We analyzed the transcripts using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to develop themes of talk across the transcripts. We first discussed these themes in pairs as we worked through the transcripts, and then negotiated the themes among the whole group. The themes we found were: (a) what we learned about being teacher-researchers; (b) what we learned about the dynamics of community; and (c) what we discovered about writing.

Themes

Teachers as Researchers

Prior to our association with the NRRC, none of the classroom teachers in our study had conducted research of any kind. As we struggled to understand our role as teacher-researchers, we came to several realizations that, while they may seem naive to seasoned researchers, truck us as important for novice teacher-researchers.

A transcript of one of our early meetings shows one member saying, "Research, you know, is a pretty scary word." We were intimidated by the very idea of research. We were not sure that ordinary teachers could do it; and once we began, we were not sure that what we were doing was really research. Our transcripts contain myriad quotes that reveal our concerns: "At this stage, I'm ambivalent about being a researcher. I don't know if I'm going to have anything at the end of this that's going to be beneficial to other teachers." "I always think it needs to be more than what we're doing. I always think of statistical things, and a lot of times, I think what I think doesn't have any relevance." "I still want to know, where's the treatment? Where are the data?" "How are we going to know anything really happened? Won't we have just a bunch of anecdotal material when we get through?"

We read descriptions of qualitative research (Hubbard & Power, 1993). We asked for and got reassurances from the NRRC coordinators. One of them, having agreed to attend one of our retreats, explained, "You just offer people different lenses on a given situation. . . . You say, here's some more. Here's some more. Here's another view. Here's another view. Here's another view."

Gradually, partly as a result of such counsel, but mostly because of our own experiences as we carried out our project, we came to believe that classroom research certainly could be done by teachers and that it was not necessarily a statistical analysis of a treatment applied to an experimental group. Our best insights came from observing and documenting our daily processes. One team member commented:

> You have a question, you're willing to document the process you go through [to answer it], and you're willing to share it in the end. That's what we need—people who will share their stories. . . . It's important that this kind of work comes from us, comes from teachers who are really teaching children and know.

Little by little, we came to feel empowered in a way that was wholly new to us. One of our teacher-researchers remarked, "How

can they say teachers aren't important enough? . . . . I have a feeling [teachers] are going to be the ones that finally make a difference." On a different occasion the same researcher asserted, "I think what we're doing is extremely relevant, especially when all this whole language stuff keeps coming up [in our district] and we keep having these battles [about it] and I see all the changes and innovations going on in language arts everywhere."

Of course, thoughts such as these came more readily when we were on one of our retreats away from the stresses and time constraints of school. Classroom research does take time. We tried to give it time during school hours, after school, at lunch, whenever we happened to meet in the hall. Often, even when we had planned carefully, the demands of teaching intruded on the time we tried to set aside for our research. A substitute teacher cancelled at the last minute. A parent called during our meeting. One or another of us came to a meeting having managed no personal writing since the last meeting because she had 25 student writing folders to evaluate for progress reports. The behavior displayed by a student during writing workshop suggested a line of inquiry we had not previously considered. We found that, since teacher-researchers must teach and do research at the same time, research projects change and grow as teachers make adjustments to suit their specific situations, their needs, and the needs of their students.

We struggled to overcome doubts and surmount obstacles so that we could share the excitement and sense of accomplishment we felt at the end of the first phase of our research. All of us have noted the impact that participation in this project has had, not only on our perceptions of ourselves as writers and as teachers of writing, but also on our perceptions of ourselves as professional educators with something to say that is worth saying. As confirmed by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1990), teacher research brings professional teachers together, forms intellectual and community bonds, and enables teachers to share their knowledge and learning with one another.

Forming a Community of Learners

We designed this project with the hope that our participation in it would suggest answers to a number of questions we had about community membership and its role in motivating learning. The following questions are representative of our concerns:

1. What factors favor the growth of a sense of true community?

2. To what degree and in what ways does membership in a community of learners change behavior?

3. To what extent and under what conditions are knowledge and skills transmitted from one member of a community of learners to others?

4. How strong an impact does community membership have on its members' values and priorities?

Shortly after launching our project, we realized that a community does not exist simply because the individuals within it say it does or want it to. Each individual brings to the community his or her own history, expectations, strengths, preconceptions, prejudices, enthusiasms, and insecurities. A sense of true community builds slowly as its members share experiences and come to know and trust each other. "Social talk" proved to be important in attempting to achieve a feeling of community. We found that a sense of shared purpose enhances a feeling of community, as does a sense of shared accomplishment. Moving from a loose collection of individuals to a true community of learners is a gradual process.

With the exception of the university researcher, we had known each other as teaching colleagues before we began our research project. Our association with each other in the past had been positive, albeit professional rather than personal. The project would necessitate our coming into much closer contact with each other, exposing ourselves in ways that we had not in the past. At our earliest meetings, before moving on to discuss and share our writing, we began by discussing the books we had been reading. Every one of us felt at ease during these "book talks," regardless of whether we were reading great literature or a genre novel, yet not everyone that had begun a piece of writing was willing to share it with the group right away. Sharing our writing was, apparently, more threatening than sharing our reading, and to do it comfortably required a greater feeling of security within the community. Even those group members who read a piece at the first session picked a piece that was light and/or impersonal.

It was only after the feeling of community had had time to grow that members were willing to risk sharing intensely personal writings. Eventually, our meetings took on the character of group therapy sessions as members achieved catharsis by reading accounts of happenings such as the birth of a child who suffered from hyaline membrane disease or the struggle of a family to adjust to betrayal by one of its members.

A strong feeling of community thus having developed among us, we could turn our attention to gauging its importance as a determinant of our behavior. We had committed ourselves as a group to certain behaviors in which we were not necessarily wont to engage: personal writing, keeping teaching journals, attending research meetings, accumulating and analyzing data. Every member honored her commitments. More than one member produced personal writing after a decade or more of procrastination. Obviously, group membership could serve as a powerful motivator.

We found that membership in our community of writers changed the way in which members who had written prior to the group's inception valued their writing efforts. The group not only provided abundant positive reinforcement, but also served to legitimize its members' efforts. One member, who had thought of herself as a "closet writer," said at the beginning of the project:

> The very idea of sitting down and trying to write fiction has always struck me as so egotistical that it was very difficult to

> admit that I was egotistical enough to do it. It was kind of a dirty little secret.

Membership in our group helped her to come out of the closet and to take her writing and herself as a writer more seriously. She not only shared her writing for the first time with her family and friends, but she also submitted a piece to a commercial publisher and spent a considerable sum of money on a correspondence course on writing for children and teenagers.

We found that individuals within our community of learners were inspired to attempt new tasks when they observed other community members attempting those tasks. When one researcher shared with the group a poem she had written, others in the group made plans to attempt poetry. When a group member's personal narrative brought the group to tears, the rest started experimenting with the emotional power of this form of writing. When another researcher read aloud a story that was based on two widely separated incidents from her childhood, other group members quizzed her about the mental process she went through to connect the incidents and fictionalize them to produce a story. They began to contemplate the possibility of fictionalizing incidents from their own lives.

At the same time that we were experiencing the effects of membership in our community of writers, we were also experiencing the effects of membership in a larger community—the community composed of the NRRC coordinators and all the teacher-researchers within the SRC. Though we met only a few times during the year, our membership in this larger community affected us powerfully. Under its influence, we found ourselves engaging in behaviors we had not theretofore considered, such as making presentations at state and international reading conferences and preparing manuscripts for submission to professional journals.

Teaching can be an isolated profession, especially teaching in a small, rural school. Association with other professionals, we found, energized us and renewed our pride in our roles as professional educators.

Teachers as Writers

Our writing group consisted of 6 individuals, each with her own personality, personal history, and previous writing experiences. Not one of us considered herself a writer, and not one of us knew what would come of our plan to become a community of writers. It was soon apparent that one of our first tasks would be to try to overcome the feeling that we had nothing worthwhile to say, that nothing we thought of writing could be worthy of print (or even scribbling on notebook paper). One researcher insisted, "Nothing important ever goes on in my life. I have nothing to write about." Another reported, "I always rehearse things in my mind if I think I have [something] I'm going to write. And I'll start thinking, 'This sounds cruddy,' when I'm running it through my mind, so I never write it down."

We knew we would never begin to feel like writers until we wrote, so we told ourselves that our writing was our own and did not have to impress anybody. We decided to

take Donald Graves' advice to write the best junk we could at the time (Graves, 1990).

Still, settling on a topic, especially a first topic, required much time and thought. To help with our topic searches, we decided to try keeping pocket notebooks with us at all times (Calkins, 1991). We would jot down bits of conversation, random thoughts, observations of events, sage quotes, and powerful images that might later prove to be inspiring. Perhaps we did not give this technique a fair trial, but our initial excitement about trying it quickly waned, and we found other uses for our pocket notebooks.

Writing topics eventually arose from various sources: sentiment, the desire to preserve memories, response to events in our personal lives, reaction to current events, response to personal reading, expansion of reminiscences, emotional or intellectual dissonance, and exploration of unresolved issues from the past. One researcher was inspired to compose a Mother's Day tribute to share with the congregation of her church. Another wrote a poem in response to the murder of Michael Jordan's father and a dramatic monologue in response to the attack on Nancy Kerrigan. Occasionally, topics seemed to spring into our heads out of thin air, sometimes with an urgency that was almost comical. One researcher described her experiences while trying to "wait out" a migraine headache in a darkened room:

> Nothing struck a chord that made me want to write about it. Then, believe it or not, I started writing about something that jumped into my head while I was trying to get rid of my headache. I had just lain down and all these thoughts were going through, so finally I just picked myself up and jotted down some notes and put it away and tried to go back to sleep, but something else would come in and I'd pick myself up again. . . .

This piece of writing later became one of the strongest accomplishments of this victim of migraine.

The more we wrote, the greater the part our unconscious minds seemed to play in the process. One researcher tried to explain how she had conceived a successful story line:

> Both of those incidents were. . .the kind of thing that you remember once in a while with your parents. . . .I started thinking about something for what they wanted me to do on that aptitude test [to qualify for their writing course], and I thought about it for several days without much success, because everything I would think of seemed to be pointless or much too lengthy or inappropriate for children or something. Then I was standing on my front porch one day and suddenly thought, "Oh, yeah, I could do that." And the link had been made, and I don't know exactly how or why.

Our writer of fiction found that what she had heard was true: characters really do take on a life of their own and occasionally bully the writer into doing things their way. She told of a character who, on the spur of the moment, insisted on engaging in a bit of petty thievery. She had not intended that anything of the kind happen, but she was learning to trust such impulses, so she gave in. It turned out that the

theft allowed the story to be resolved in a particularly effective way.

Other researchers experienced similar "happy accidents"—a setting, a scene, a turn of phrase, a rhyme that practically wrote itself. It would occasionally happen that one of us would achieve, for a few moments, a state of mind in which it seemed that every word she put down on paper was right and true, in which the writer could fancy herself in contact with some creative power beyond herself. At a loss to explain these phenomena, we took to shrugging our shoulders and saying, "Magic happens."

Magic might happen, but it takes time and toil to make it happen. Serendipitous gifts were our reward for carrying writing projects in our minds at a level just below conscious thought for days and weeks and months. More often than it was effortless, writing was frustrating, tension-producing, time-consuming, and, simply put, *hard*. As often as not, we were bogged down, blocked, or unsatisfied with our efforts.

At such times, we would turn to each other for help. The writing group was lavish with its praise, and sometimes lavish praise was just what we needed. At other times, though, we needed help with a problem we could not solve by ourselves. We found our fellow teachers far too polite to imply criticism by giving help for which we had not specifically asked. If we wanted a brainstorming session or a critique or a final proofreading, we had to say so in no uncertain terms. Some members felt uncomfortable asking for help in our group meetings; all of us were extremely circumspect when giving it.

Those of us who wrote personal narrative thought of it as a lesser form of writing than the fiction that others wrote. The group members that taught upper elementary grades had noticed that their students seemed to regard personal narrative as a form of writing from which the most able of them had graduated, and even though we knew better intellectually, some of us shared an assumption that personal narrative was a preliminary step that did not count as "real writing." One researcher, who wrote primarily personal narrative, speaking to another, who wrote primarily fiction, commented, "I honestly see [fiction] as better. I think I have a hierarchy in mind that writing a story like you do is better writing." Transcripts of our meetings show us repeatedly discussing the relative merits of personal narrative and fiction, trying to convince ourselves that personal narrative is possibly the most authentic form of writing.

Having discovered the interrelationship between writing and reading, we speculated that we would value personal narrative more highly if we read more of it. One of our NRRC coordinators, Betty Shockley, brought us a 3-ft stack of published books, including Ashton-Warner's *Teacher* (1963) and Kohl's *36 Children* (1967). Those of us that read from the stack appreciated the accomplishments of the authors in that special way that only another writer can, but our writers of personal narrative still were unwilling to consider themselves real writers until they had produced a piece of fiction.

We thought that preparing personal narrative for presentation to a wider audience might raise it above mere recording in our minds.

That, unfortunately, meant revising and proofreading, processes that most of us, like our students, assiduously avoided. Several of us frankly were uninterested in pieces once the drafting was over. Others were reluctant to proofread because of a lack of skill with spelling, punctuation, and the like. We never knew for sure if it was coincidence that the one group member who enjoyed revising and proofreading, finding these activities relaxing after the tension of drafting, was also the only one that worked exclusively on a word processor. We thought that if we could find a way to cure ourselves of our reluctance to edit, the same cure might work for our students. We considered a number of remedies: helping a friend who is eager to revise, being helped by a friend who is interested in your piece, developing a greater sense of audience, collaborating, and letting someone who enjoys it do it.

The first year of our project was over before we had completely explored those remedies. In fact, there are a number of issues we have not finished examining:

- How can the group best meet the needs of its members?
- How bound by others' suggestions should writing group members feel?
- What is the best way to set group goals while still recognizing individual reactions to assignments, deadlines, and so forth?
- Are critiques and feedback other than praise best given in pairs rather than in the whole group?
- How do we continue to grow as writers once our project is completed?

This last question is particularly important to us personally, for we have discovered that we are all writers. Being in the group has given us security, legitimacy, and the courage to write. At the end of the year, one writer remarked, "I was comparing what I had written to what I was reading, and I thought, 'I'm a better writer than that.'" Another one of us observed:

> I am not Reynolds Price, I am not Lee Smith, I am not Bailey White, but I am who I am. I have my own point of view, my own background out of which to write, my own relationship with the language. I am a writer, and if someone asks, "How good a writer?" my answer is, "As good as that (her collection of writings) and getting better." Before becoming a part of this group, I wouldn't have been capable of having those thoughts, much less saying them aloud.

Still another reported:

> I read differently, listen to the words people speak differently, even examine my life experiences differently. I feel a great challenge to impart this experience and the value of writing to my students as we begin Phase 2 of our project.

Implications

As a result of our participation in our adult writing workshop, we have reflected on

some experiences that we believe have important implications for how we structure our whole language classes, particularly writing workshops. These implications suggest changes in how we think about: (a) the writing process; (b) being ready to write; (c) integrating reading and writing workshops; (d) giving and receiving feedback; and (e) classroom communities.

The Writing Process

"Today we will learn the first step in the writing process—prewriting. Please take out a sheet of paper and list five topics about which you could write." We might have conducted such a lesson in the past, but now to insist that students follow a prescribed set of steps (prewrite, draft, revise, proofread, publish) in an assigned manner at a predetermined pace strikes us as artificial and stultifying. We know from experience that, while authorship of a piece of writing necessarily takes a writer through the steps listed above, steps may be performed simultaneously, in a different order, without conscious thought, and at various paces. We also know that writers sometimes cast about, writing a little of this and a little of that, making false starts, allowing themselves the freedom to experiment. We found that the notion that we had to see every piece we started through to the bitter end was a destructive one that suppressed our very willingness to write.

We believe we can best serve our students by allowing them the same freedoms that we found necessary to our own development as writers. We will give them explicit permission to put pieces aside for a time or to abandon them altogether. We will emphasize the importance of self-expression, fluency, experimentation, and making decisions about their own writing.

Being Ready to Write

"But I don't know what to write," our students whine. How could they not know what to write when we have just conducted a minilesson designed to stimulate ideas for topics? There are millions of things in the world to write about, and we've suggested fully half of them. Couldn't they at least write about what they had for lunch instead of just sitting there?

When we attempted our own writing, we learned how difficult arriving at a topic can be. It would have seemed pointless to write about what we had for lunch, and we did not want our writing to be pointless. We were not out to waste our time. Finding a worthwhile topic took time and thought. We were helped sometimes by reading, sometimes by talking, sometimes by doodling, sometimes by free writing, and sometimes by what an onlooker might call daydreaming. We intend to suggest these techniques to our students and to provide them with the time that every writer needs.

Integrating Literature and Writing

We found some connections between reading and writing that have implications for our whole language classrooms. Becoming writers revolutionized the way we read, making us far more aware and appreciative of the author's craft. Conversely, our reading had an impact on our writing. We found ourselves

imitating the style of the author whose work we were currently reading, sometimes on purpose and sometimes unconsciously. The kind of literature we most liked to read was also the kind we most wanted to write. Increasing the breadth of our reading helped us to find value in different forms of writing and uncovered new possibilities for our own writing.

Reflecting on our own experiences as readers and writers helped us to see the wisdom of scheduling language arts blocks rather than separate classes for each aspect of language arts. We are even more committed to using the best of children's literature to acquaint children with the beauty and power of language and to lead them toward beauty and power in their own use of language. We intend to immerse our students in language, exposing them to many genres, authors, and forms of expression to open possibilities for real reading and writing experiences.

Giving and Receiving Feedback

Experiences in our adult writing group have made us more aware of the importance of feedback to the fledgling writer and of the difficulty of getting and giving feedback that is appropriate and useful. We found that the level of trust within the group influenced the members' willingness to expose their writing to scrutiny by the group. Some members withheld their writing, participating in the group in other ways, while they waited for their sense of security to grow. Some shared selected pieces but held back pieces that were highly personal or that represented an especially high investment of effort. In the beginning most of us wanted support and encouragement. Our self-concepts as writers were too tender at first to accept critical feedback, constructive or otherwise. We found that, on many occasions, having a community that would read or listen to our efforts was fulfilling in and of itself. Our experiences have led us to understand the importance of working to make our classrooms places in which children feel safe enough to take risks and valued enough to work generously with other children. We must model and provide guidelines for giving feedback appropriately. We must never allow any child's work to be denigrated.

We found that, if our group was to provide useful feedback to its members, it was necessary for its members to state the kind of feedback they were seeking. We hesitated to point out that a writer had misplaced a modifier if we had not been asked to provide assistance with editing. We considered it presumptuous to take over someone else's story line unless the writer informed us that she needed help advancing the plot. Members of the group provided excellent assistance, but only if and when they were asked for it. Our students may not be as tactful as the members of our group. Still, if we teach them to articulate their needs when they bring a piece of their writing before the group (or to a conference with us), they will be more likely to get the feedback they need and not the criticism for which they are not ready.

We found that the whole group, even after the feeling of community was well established, was not always a comfortable forum for disclosing heartfelt or highly personal writing. Neither was it the best setting for time-consuming pro-

cesses, like line editing or critiquing in depth. Establishing writing buddies allowed us to share our writing in a more intimate, comfortable environment and to give our buddy's writing our close, line-by-line attention. At least one partnership reported having developed a rapport and a style of working together that allowed them to be quite productive. Some individuals were less productive when working with a buddy than when meeting regularly with the whole group. Our experiences convinced us that our students would benefit from being allowed and encouraged to try a number of situations for giving and receiving feedback, and to work primarily in that situation that allows them to feel most comfortable and to achieve their highest level of productivity.

Classroom Communities

Having been a part of a community of writers, having observed its form and function during the first year of our project, we believe that we are now in a position to comment on the impact of community on learning. Throughout this article, we have documented the profound changes that membership in our small community has had on our attitudes and our behavior, especially our targeted behavior, writing. We believe that membership in classroom communities can have just as dramatic an effect on our students. However, as we have said elsewhere in this article, true communities do not exist simply because we want them to or say they do. Our project would have been far less meaningful to us had our NRRC coordinators or our university researcher tried to dictate the direction of our study. Our community might never have come together had we not conceived our own common purpose and developed a sense of shared accomplishment.

If we wish to entice our students to claim membership in classroom communities of learners, we must reveal the fascination and power of the world of learning. Then, as much as the exigencies of curricula will permit, we must allow them to claim responsibility for and ownership of their own learning. Until we do, however acquiescent some children are about it, education will be something imposed on children by adults. Only when children perceive reading and writing as tools valued within their communities by their *peers* for pursuing their own purposes will they, too, discover the magic. The insights we are gaining in our new roles as writers and teacher-researchers will, we believe, enable us to lead our students on journeys neither we nor they otherwise might have imagined.

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