Let it roll on by:

REFOCUSING WRITING INSTRUCTION IN TIMES OF CHANGE

By Ann D. David and Katrina Jansky

Ann D. David is an assistant professor in the Dreeben School of Education at the University of the Incarnate Word in San Antonio. Her research interests are writing and the teaching of writing and teacher preparation in disciplinary literacy. She can be reached at addavid@uiwtx.edu.

Katrina Jansky is a lecturer in Curriculum and Instruction at Texas State University in San Marcos. Her research interests are adolescent readers and writers, education policy, and preservice teacher preparation. She can be reached at katjansky@txstate.edu.

Abstract: In the article "No Need to Reinvent the Wheel: Reading Instruction in a Time of Change" published in *English in Texas* in 2017, the authors, Ann D. David and Katrina Jansky, viewed reading instruction through five touchstones: time, choice, relevance, talk, and routines and rituals. This article expands on those touchstones by examining writing instruction, offering classroom practices that can support a diverse range of student writers and bring back joy and pleasure to the writing classroom.

Keywords: writing instruction, writing, writing workshop, standards

A year ago, we invited Texas English teachers to consider reading instruction that does not have to change with every policy shift, new test, or changing standard. That article offered examples of instruction built on five touchstones: time, choice, relevance, talk, and rituals and routines. We ended with a question: "How can you create and maintain a space in which students become readers who fall in love with books and reading?" (David & Jansky, 2017, p. 35).

In this article, we will engage in a bit of revision, as all writers do, by asking teachers, "How can you create and maintain a space in which students become writers who fall in love with writing and see themselves as writers?" We will lean on our previous words (as writers do all the time) because things are not that different for writing than they are for reading. So, "no matter the test, the curriculum or the standards, English teachers can create spaces for students" (p. 32) to fall in love with writing and build a writerly identity.

As new standards or new tests or new mandates or new programs roll in—and roll in they will—consider that writing should not bend to serve only those purposes. Long ago, Hillocks (2002) established that the kind of formulaic writing instruction that grows out of test preparation fails to support students' writerly lives (Gray, 2014) and does not necessarily help them perform well on the test (Albertson, 2007). Instead, "we should ask how writing can foster and track the movement of the mind" (Newkirk, 1989, p. 28), and how writing instruction can support students in their moment *now*—in school

and out of school—for life in college and in the work world.

So, how is a teacher to grow students' writerly lives? Our answer now is the same as for reading: ground writing instruction in time, choice, relevance, talk, and rituals and routines. These touchstones for writing instruction serve teachers by paving a path through the morass of testing and mandates and curricula, offering key ideas to return to and turn back to. Focusing instruction on, and viewing curriculum through, these touchstones becomes a way to center the writers in your classroom, seeing their writing lives and celebrating the writing they do.

These five touchstones for the teaching of writing run through our many conversations with writing teachers, our experience of teaching writing, and our reading about writing. In the sixties and seventies, Murray (1968) and Graves (1975) pointed out the complexity of the writing process and encouraged us to teach children to write by sitting down and **talking** with writers about writing. Atwell (1987) and Calkins (1986) helped establish the **routines and rituals** to make the necessary and important space in our classrooms for **choice** and **time**. **Relevance** in writing instruction can range from writing in digital spaces (Hicks, 2009) and writing to change the world (Bomer & Bomer, 2001) to writing to craft our stories and histories (Romano, 1987). In this act of writing, students exercise their voices and light a writing fire that can burn well beyond any single assignment or test (Johnson, 2017; Kinloch, 2008; Martínez, Orellana, Pacheco, & Carbone, 2008; Price-Dennis, 2016).

We take up each of these five touchstones and develop the thinking around each of them in the context of classroom writing instruction. And, as before, we offer the words of brilliant, K-12 teachers of writing doing this work in their classrooms every day.

Time

In order to create stronger writers, students need time to engage in the act of writing. They need time to build stamina, fluency, engagement, skills, and strategies all while problem solving, exploring, and creating. And they need time to fail and to recover. Finding this time means simply making a lot of time during a class period for writing. Somewhere between 50 and 75 percent of the students' time in your class should be spent on writing. "How," you might ask, "do I find that much time? We have so much to do!" Our answer is that of course you have a lot to do, but more importantly, the students have a lot of writing they need to do. So, it means not doing some things.

Culham's (2016) list of "Dumb Things in Writing Instruction" in her book *The Writing Thief* is a good place to start when trying to find time to write. Do you spend time each week on prompted writing? Even in October? Stop doing that and get students collecting writing in notebooks (Buckner, 2005). Are you teaching students formulas for their writing? A-N-T or fill-in-the-blank thesis statements or O-R-E-O? Stop doing that and support students in figuring out how to organize their writing based on what they're writing about and who they are writing to (David & Jansky, 2017). Will notebooks and organic organization take more time? Maybe, initially, but by investing that time now, your students will become more independent writers, and you will not need to respond to comments like "I don't know what to write about" all year long.

By investing in the here and now of writing with students, you are also investing in their future as writers. And if writers practice the skill of asking, "What do I write about today?" or "What does this piece of writing need to look like?" they will get better and better at answering it themselves, without you (Fisher & Frey, 2013). This independence also creates more of that illusive time that you and your students need.

Students need the time to just sit and record their thoughts and stories. When students start listening to their inner-monologue, they find voices, longings, memories, frustrations, and loves that they never knew they had. Life becomes a little clearer when space is made for students to explore their writing lives. So this is the way I start almost every year in Writer's Workshop. I just make space for students to write and explore. At first, the time that I give them to write feels as frigid and expansive as Lake Michigan. Some acclimate quicker than others, but we discuss how to warm up or get started in our writing. I teach lessons on how to work past "I'm done." We train ourselves to be more willing to listen to the thoughts that race around the recesses of our brain.

—Gusty Simpson, high school teacher,
St. Catherine School, Houston, TX

Choice

"But I don't have anything to write about." As teachers, we want to help students succeed, so when students try to "overcome a demon that sits in [their] head" (Elbow, 1989, p. 18) and keep them from writing, we look for solutions. Or we do not want to face a chorus of "I don't know what to write," so we make the choice for the whole class. But those teacher moves, which we hope support students in writing, allow students to avoid the hardest part of writing: getting words on a page. This moment is hard—for both teachers and students—and yet, avoiding the writing of words or trying to plan around the writing of words only makes writing harder now, and into the future (Atwell, 1998; Dredger, 2008).

By prompting writing, teachers create two interrelated sets of problems: first, students write what they think the teacher wants to hear or what they think is appropriate for school, and second, the prompted writing is lifeless because it is merely obedient to the task (Elbow, 1998). Students avoid writing about the reality of their lives because school-centric prompts only nod toward authenticity. Students write about Six Flags instead of about the New Year's Eve family party where the uncles got drunk and fired off guns at midnight, which scared the dogs, who ran off, who then were chased by the drunk uncles, meaning the kids then had to go rescue the dogs—and maybe the uncles. While this story—and others like it—is worthy of writing about, students will self-edit it out of existence

as "not appropriate for school." A great story will be lost because it does not fit the prompt.

Prompts limit topics as well as students' choice of audience or form. So many students in Texas have only ever written 26-line STAAR essays. With only these writing experiences, students have no clear understanding of either audience or form. The form for the STAAR essay will never again appear in their lives, and the audience is some anonymous person in the ether. When given choice in topic and form, though, students learn about how genre and voice and topic are intertwined. Whether they end up writing memoirs about drunk uncles on New Year's Eve, diary entries masquerading as poems (e.g., Creech, 2001), or loud defenses of constitutional rights, making those choices about topic, form, and audience teaches students more than prompted or formulaic writing ever could.

The "insider secret" of student choice is that it limits their excuses for not writing. While they are taught skills, genre qualities, and guided through the writing process, the entire time they are using their interests as a medium to achieve the final product. When students' opinions are respected and valued, they are more willing to express themselves on paper, which is the ultimate goal of any writing teacher.

—Heathcliff Lopez, high school teacher, North East ISD, San Antonio, TX

Relevance

Relevance is not about what is relevant to the TEKS or to the district's scope and sequence or to the next benchmark, or even what the teacher deems relevant that day. Relevance is about student writers making *their* own choices about *their* writing in the midst of *their* composing process. This stance changes, not eliminates, the role of the teacher in students learning to write. "As a teacher of writing, of essays, I look for these open spaces, where the writer hints at a territory into which he or she can move" (Newkirk, 1989, p. 27).

That Six Flags essay might have that open space: maybe an odd reference to a rollercoaster in California or a throwaway line about having ridden the fastest rollercoasters in the US. Those moments that might read as hiccups, that might get the comment "Does not follow," are the open spaces that belie a passion about rollercoasters, if only the student were not so focused on the essay template or on fitting into 26 lines. The teacher should look for these moments as they organically emerge, and then do the work of connecting to the standards, curriculum, or test. Relevance always starts with the writer, in those open spaces "where the writer seems to lose control, where the writing becomes disjointed, where it strays" (Newkirk, 1989, p. 27).

In these disjointed, straying moments—when grammar breaks down or language becomes slippery—the student is reaching somewhere outside of what their current written language proficiency allows. These moments of student passion, then, can serve as ways to make revision and grammar relevant for students. Suddenly pronoun antecedents or complex sentences find meaning because of the students' desire to communicate clearly with their audience. Revision, in this scenario, is not simply fixing the commas, but is radically revising (Willingham, 2004) for voice or genre, adding and taking away whole chunks of words.

Writing gives students a chance to tell their stories, the stories they choose to tell. Often, we encourage students to include historical examples in their essays to support their arguments. But what if we told them their own experiences are worthy examples too? In no other core content area are students allowed to create art out of the ether as they do in writing. In no other core content area are students allowed to share their uninterrupted thoughts and ideas as they can in writing. What is more relevant for our students right now than voice and agency?

—Susan Diaz, Director of Secondary Education, North East ISD, San Antonio, TX

Talk

While the relationship between spoken and written language is complex (National Council of Teachers of English, 2016), writing does not happen without talk. Teachers utter volumes of directions in a day, and students certainly do their share of talking. But these kinds of talk are different than the focused, thoughtful talk (Mercer, 2002; Nystrand, 2006) that supports writing. These kinds of talk happen across all the people in a writing classroom: inner-speech that moves the speaker through the task of writing words (Britton, 1993), peer-to-peer conversations that push thinking and writing (Ricks, Morrison, Wilcox, & Cutri, 2017), or student-to-teacher conversations that nudge a novice as only an expert can (Anderson, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978).

All of these kinds of talk around writing can be taught to writers in K-12 settings. The inner-speech talk comes as students must ask themselves which choices work for their writing, take time to engage in the work of writing, and find relevance in their writing work. Teacher modeling of writing via think-alouds also shows students what inner-speech can be (Englert, Raphael, Anderson, Anthony, & Stevens, 1991, p. 339). Peer-to-peer talk around writing can move beyond saying "I like . . ." and attending to grammar and conventions. Instead, peer responders might use sentence stems like "I heard . . ." and "I notice . . ." and "I wonder . . ." Peers and teachers using the notice and name strategy from *Hidden Gems* (Bomer, 2010) see choices the writer is making and name the choice, or link what the student writer is doing to what a published writer does. Talk is powerful because "students who conversed more and more over time gradually assumed what can best be described as academic identities" (Zwiers & Crawford, 2011, p. 24). And those academic identities, more than any formula or prompt, will stay with students and guide them for the rest of their lives—or at least through school.

Writerly talk is important for all classrooms, but it is vital in primary classrooms because so much of a young child's writing is done through oral drafting. . . . Talking with teachers and peers also generates excitement for writing, helps writers generate new ideas, and gives writers a chance to sequence their story and add details before putting

their words on paper. I encourage this kind of talk by engaging in it with students and praising this talk when students participate in it (especially when it is outside of the writing block). We also discuss what writerly talk looks and sounds like in the classroom and how to refocus our energies when our talk gets off-topic.

—Angela Holcek, elementary school teacher, Round Rock ISD, Round Rock, TX

Rituals and Routines

We have to be taught rules and routines. Young children spend the first few years of school just learning school. As one of our husbands once said, "Isn't kindergarten just learning to stand in line, be nice to one another, and keep your hands to yourself?" So, just as children need to be taught school rituals, they need to be invited into developing rituals for writing. One of these rituals is making space for writing every day. Then students know that writing is coming and they know it is expected, they know they can greet the notebook with something to say. Also, when students know the routine, they do not need to spend energy figuring out what is going on and can dedicate that energy to doing the writing. Further, "if the ritual is centered on time given to reading and writing, relevant to the student, the student is learning to center their attention on becoming a reader and writer" (Rowe, 2008). And while the rituals of school will be ones that are useful only for the first quarter of a student's life, the ability to attend to writing through ritual is a lifelong skill.

Time to write is integrated into all we do, but the students can count on two specific parts of the day: our morning meeting and our writing workshop. . . . Our writing workshop time is different from morning meeting in that we're actively involved in creating a variety of text for local audiences. This recurring space becomes a favorite because of the practiced autonomy, the peer support, and the anticipation of celebrating with authentic audiences. . . . It is my own writerly gumption that has designed the minutes into more them—less me, and when the collective fire is hot for writing messages to the world, I know the usage and mechanics of language are in full force. This room-rich hum is what workshop is all about. And there's nothing like it.

—Kerry Alexander, elementary school teacher, Austin ISD, Austin, TX

Conclusion

Perhaps, more so than our article on reading, this article seems optimistic, looking at writing instruction through some powerful rose-colored glasses. We spend a lot of time talking to teachers about writing and teaching writing and teachers express fear, worry, uncertainty, pressure, and insecurity around the teaching of writing. Research confirms the pervasiveness of those feelings (Hicks, Whitney, Fredricksen, & Zuidema, 2017; Morgan & Pytash, 2015; Troia & Graham, 2016). Or maybe this kind of instruction worked for you as a writer, but you are not sure about students who actively resist writing. Maybe a colleague talked about workshop and how well it worked for her students, but your administrator has rejected these ideas or your curriculum is too prescribed. Or perhaps your school has to raise writing test scores, as do most schools in Texas, and this vision of writing is not tied explicitly to testing.

So, in reading this article, you might find yourself doubting what we are saying. The touchstones offered here, though, and the reflections from the teachers who rely on them to teach writing, offer a basis for that optimism. There are classrooms where teaching writing is joyful and students engage in writing joyfully, and there can be more

classrooms like that. We have seen this kind of writing instruction work in classrooms with a diverse range of students—by which we mean that we have seen EL students, students enrolled in special education, students identified as gifted, students who attend private or public schools, students in under-resourced and well-resourced schools, and students of color become independent writers who select their own topics, revise willingly, and become better writers. A bonus effect of this instruction is that many students also pass the STAAR test because they were taught to write without insulting their intelligence (Bomer, 2011).

But merely attempting to teach our students without insulting them is a pretty low bar. In fact, we want both teachers and students to find pleasure in writing and the teaching of writing. This pleasure can be found because "youths are having, and desiring, integrated experiences of pleasure and purpose in their literacy activities" (Skerrett, 2016, p. 119), often in out-of-school spaces. And teachers deserve that same purpose and pleasure in the teaching of writing. In classrooms where the instructional path is laid with these touchstones, we have seen countless teachers find joy in teaching writing, and many avowedly reluctant writers embrace a writerly identity.

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