Read-Alouds, Structure, and Sharing:

Planning Strategically to Carve Out Time for Meaningful Literacy Experiences

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Abstract: The authors, university instructors, when confronted with extreme time constraints in a summer course during the COVID-19 pandemic, redesigned their course structure prioritizing their values and goals. Intentional choices provide teacher candidates with time together to slow down and interact more fully in a read-aloud centered, writer's workshop. Carefully selected texts were modeled, and the teacher candidates were able to have a full workshop experience as they studied and wrote poetry. Learning opportunities for other objectives were carefully developed to maintain the quality of the online course. This reorganization resulted in engaging peer-to-peer interactions that supported risk-taking during the writing process. Preservice teachers had an experience that improved their writing confidence and increased their desire to write with their own students when they become teachers.

Keywords: modeling, workshop structure, writing workshop, read-alouds, literacy values

> "I put a Do NOT DISTURB sign on my door when I was reading aloud for most of my career." –Steven L. Layne

Intention gets lost in the shuffle and goals lost to mandates. Teachers set out to provide meaningful instruction, but then reality strikes. For us, that reality collided with our summer teaching schedule. In just five short weeks, we were required to teach a typical sixteen-week semester course to elementary teacher candidates at a rural university in Northeast Texas in the midst of a pandemic. As COVID-19 restrictions pushed courses to online formats, we knew that we would have to make strategic decisions when planning our summer courses, while maintaining core values of writing workshop ideology. To speed up instruction under the constraints of time and virtual learning, we needed to slow down the process around non-negotiable elements of a writing workshop: read-alouds, structure, and sharing.

Balancing curriculum mandates, best intentions, and environmental constraints is not unique to reading courses in college. As experienced K-12 teachers, we have experienced the push and pull of district curriculums, administrative mandates, and the overemphasis of standardized tests when we planned for our elementary and secondary learners. These experiences have taught us to resist the inclination to throw out important lesson elements when disruptions occur, and to reorganize teaching around core values as literacy instructors. These core values,

including mentoring, discussion, and sharing during a writing workshop, are essential to developing writers at any age. We hoped that at the very least, our teacher candidates would leave the course with a memorable experience they might one day be inclined to emulate in their future classrooms, no matter what their teaching circumstances may be.

Literacy II is a course for undergraduate, elementary teacher candidates. We are very fortunate at our university to have National Writing Project (NWP) trained faculty that teach this course, and both authors are leaders in the local NWP affiliate. We have several reading courses in our sequence, and Literacy II specifically focuses on writing workshop approaches, reading assessment applications, and guided reading instruction. Reading assessment and guided reading are products of previous coursework, but this is the only course in the literacy sequence that explicitly breaks down the process, experience, and assessment of teaching writing in a workshop environment.

In this article, we will share how these circumstances pushed us to evaluate priorities for how we use our class time, the program's long-term goals for teacher candidates, and how these decisions led to course improvement as we intentionally narrowed the focus to slow down and emphasize non-negotiable elements of writing instruction.

Mentor Texts: Modeling Writing Instruction by Reading Aloud

Given the abbreviated length and fast pace of a summer course, we decided to use a focal text to frame instruction in writing pedagogy and a writing workshop experience. Because we wanted teacher candidates to experience the value that reading aloud brings to a writing workshop, we selected the verse novel *Love That Dog* (Creech, 2001), a story about a young boy's experience in a poetry writing workshop in elementary school. We hoped this text would offer students opportunities to make connections with an emergent writer's experience in a writing workshop and their own experiences in the course's writing workshop framework.

Love That Dog is a powerful text for introducing the writing workshop framework. The teacher in the novel, Miss Stretchberry, leads her students, including Jack, the narrator and main character, through a school year of writing workshops using model poems by authors including William Carlos Williams, Robert Frost, Williams Blake, Valerie Worth, Arnold Adoff, S. C. Rigg, and Walter Dean Myers. The book is literally Jack's journal imitating the poetry of these authors as he tells the story of his yellow dog (See Table 1). Additionally, Jack's journey as a resistant, yet emerging elementary-level writer perfectly illustrated the writing process that we wanted our teacher candidates to understand.

Research shows that teachers who experience the writing process by composing their own writing in a writing workshop format tend to better appreciate their students' writing journeys (Dutro et al., 2017; Hall, Gao, & Hirsch, 2021; Street, 2003). Thus, our first goal was to model the writing workshop by teaching the literacy curriculum in the format of a writing workshop focused on one genre and one focal text.

Modeling the workshop approach in class was a priority because teachers most often replicate positive learning experiences from their own learning (Chicoine, 2004; Goodlad, 1982). Because we had just three hours in an online class that met on Zoom, the only synchronous time available, once a week for five weeks, we needed to choose our models strategically. For us, our instruction evolved from the texts we chose for mentoring, so protecting the time to use read-alouds with mentor texts was both effective writing instruction (Layne, 2015, Marchetti & O'Dell, 2015) and one of our non-negotiable writing workshop practices. We intentionally privileged the recursive relationship between reading and writing (National Council of Teachers of English, 2006), making read-alouds a focal point of writing instruction. Therefore, we strategically chose to read aloud to students at the beginning of each class for three important reasons that often writing teachers must often consider when planning instruction: 1) to ensure that read-alouds are prioritized so that they are not inadvertently sacrificed should class time run out, 2) to provide opportunity to fully experience the writing process and workshop experiences, and 3) to establish a framework for students to experience the joy of participating in a community of practice (Levine, 2010) by writing, sharing, and learning together around a common text and purpose for writing.

However, we had other course requirements that required attention, which included complex assignments requiring extensive instructions and modeling craft lessons. The writing workshop approach provided a framework for students to complete an assessment and write their own writing workshop lesson plan. This lesson plan asked the teacher candidates to use our poetry lessons as models to write their own lessons using another genre. For example, students selected the books *Earrings!* by Judith Viorst, *I Wanna Iguana* by Karen Kaufman Orloff, *Red Is Best* by Kathy Stinson, *Stella Writes an Opinion* by Janiel Wagstaff, and *Have I Got a Book for You* by Mélanie Watt to write lesson plans for teaching students to reading and write argumentative texts. Therefore, the writing workshop approach framed our method for teaching the complex content of this Literacy II course with three explicit intentions in mind involving read-alouds, structure, and sharing.

"The Red Wheelbarrow" – William Carlos Williams (1962)	**"October 4" from *Love That Dog* – Sharon Creech (2001)**	**Writing Workshop Participant – Summer 2021**
so much depends	So much depends	So much depends
upon	upon	upon
a red wheel	a blue car	glare-free, Zoom glasses
barrow	spattered with mud	discarded for now
glazed with rain	speeding down the road.	broken on my desk.
water		
beside the white		
chickens		

Table 1: Models and Student Work

Structure: Balancing the Ebb and Flow During a Writing Workshop

Writing workshop instruction requires teachers to be organized and intentional about the texts they choose as well as how they use their time in class. Seemingly mismatched interdependent elements depend on balancing structure and freedom: teachable moments and time to write, quiet reflection, and vulnerable sharing. Bennett (2007) refers to the movement in the writing workshop as a cycle of "capture and release" in which students move between whole group, small group, and independent writing experiences. Because we always began our writing workshop by reading aloud, we used the opportunity to teach a minilesson related to a stage in the writing process and a craft lesson. We then released our students to write independently before reeling them back in for a whole group or small group session to share their writing and debrief the experience, and then repeated the cycle by releasing them again to resume writing.

Because of time constraints and teaching online through Zoom, we found it necessary to create a structure that would support the teacher candidates' learning experiences about the writing process outside of class while maintaining the momentum of a writing workshop. We did this by creating video presentations for students to view independently that emphasized modeling. For example, an assessment assignment included a template and sentence starters to reduce the ambiguity of expectations and to streamline the teacher candidates' ability to assess their students' results.

As experienced writing workshop instructors, we understood the importance of establishing predictable, yet flexible routines. In a writing workshop, this involves a cycle of read, write, share, and repeat. Therefore, the decision to focus on one genre to teach writing workshop routines allowed us to more fully experience the cyclical and recursive nature of the writing process. Centering instruction around the read-aloud was an essential element of maintaining that routine. It inspired discussion and facilitated sharing writing among peers. During writing minilessons, we focused on word choice, rhyme scheme, and description, for example, much like Jack experienced in writing conferences with his teacher in *Love That Dog*. Minilessons, writing conferences, and mentor texts are key routines in a writing workshop meant to scaffold writers with meaningful and engaging literacy experiences.

In the Literacy II writing workshop, we included instructional routines to offer teacher candidates an opportunity to experience the rhythm, the ebb and flow, of a writing workshop. During our Zoom meetings, we read aloud, and before writing, we facilitated several prewriting activities to create writing territories (Atwell, 1987, 2017). Our read-alouds were short. We became Miss Stretchberry, using her mentors and her student Jack's writing to provide multiple models to imitate but also to analyze. Using mentor texts to teach writing is meant to offer examples of authentic writing for students to examine and emulate if it fits their own writing purposes, which suggests that writers have choice in what to write, what models to embrace, and which mentors to emulate. To facilitate a writer's autonomy to make decisions relevant to the writer's intended purpose calls for routine examination of mentor texts, discussion about author's craft and a writer's purposes for writing. We encouraged discussion about the relationships between writing models found in the mentor texts and why these texts were selected. Was it a structure, a literary device, rhyme, rhythm, a theme, or some combination of these? Ultimately, we wanted teacher candidates to recognize that a writer of any age, school age or adult, may use mentor texts as models of authentic writing techniques to inspire writing and to choose what elements from the text they may choose to imitate in their own compositions.

To facilitate these experiences in an online writing workshop with teacher candidates, we used Google Forms to organize the many tasks necessary for our students to experience in this abbreviated and accelerated writing workshop. Because this was an online course that met via Zoom, our students needed continuous support and modeling outside of the scheduled Zoom sessions. We embedded prerecorded minilessons—video lessons modeling poetry and craft, followed by opportunities to answer questions and reflect on the process. Teacher candidates were asked to freewrite in their journals and emulate the poetry they heard in the mentor texts, and then share their writing with their peers in class Zoom meetings where we could be together synchronously. Minilessons were designed to emulate the ebb and flow of the writing workshop: reading and analyzing mentor texts, reflecting, writing, sharing, and writing again. By completing the assignments listed in the Google Forms, students remained organized and focused while working through stages of the writing process as if they were attending an in-person class. Questions were posed in the Google Forms to facilitate reflection about their learning experiences about teaching writing. Then, students were asked to apply what they were learning about teaching writing and their own experiences in the course writing workshop to write lessons they might use when they become certified teachers.

Sharing: Overcoming Vulnerabilities in a Safe Environment

The writing workshop approach works well to teach writing across any genre; however, we intentionally focused on poetry because poems tend to be quick and fun writing experiences. We aimed for teacher candidates to apply what they were learning about teaching writing and their own experiences in their literacy methods class to designing writing workshop instruction. The teacher candidates were asked to choose a genre and a children's book that was representative of that genre to write their own writing workshop lesson plan. To start, the teacher candidates considered the TEKS related to the genre, and then they chose a text that provided opportunities for them to model the writing represented in the text. Because our goal was to provide teacher candidates with positive experiences in a writing workshop, they were asked to plan and share their own writing workshops for their future classrooms in a lesson planning writing workshop. We hoped that the supportive workshop environment would allow them to transfer their lesson planning and writing experiences to their beliefs about teaching writing and designing safe literacy communities and rich writing instruction for future students.

In our classrooms, we aimed to create an environment where it was safe to be vulnerable (Villaume & Brandt, 1999). The routines built around our read-alouds supported writers who feel vulnerable by building community around a common text and writing experiences. Google Forms were used to streamline the process by delineated course assignments so that teacher candidates could efficiently work through the fast pace of a summer semester and focus on immersing themselves into writing workshop experiences. Over the five-week semester, there were five Google Sheets, one for each week. Each sheet included the weekly readings and assignments with reminders about small details that we know students often forget. Then, links to read-alouds and minilesson videos were created with space for the students to write a response. The form

helped students stay on track to complete long-term assignments and prevented them from overlooking small assignments.

This gave us time during our Zoom meetings to slow down and participate in a meaningful workshop. We read aloud multiple pieces during each Zoom meeting—poetry pieces that varied from humorous to bizarre, even a read aloud of S. G. Rigg's "The Apple," a concrete poem written in the shape of an apple, just to show it *can* be read. We learned about one another because we shared what was going on in our lives. The first author of this article wrote with the students in class about the dog she found near death on her walk that morning. The next week she wrote again and told the joyful story of the reunion with his owner. In turn, teacher candidates shared their stories of their hopes and dreams of becoming great teachers and making meaningful connections with students. They shared their experiences at jobs they were working while they attended school, many of them working with children in the community.

Once we all had a collection of poems, we chose one special piece that we wanted to spend more time on so we could "gift" it to someone we loved. We called this "Choose Your Own Audience." We workshopped these pieces together, and then the teacher candidates, based on the content of their poem, shared them with their intended audiences. The feedback they received reaffirmed them as poets and extended their relationships with the people they care about in their lives.

Now What?

There are strategic choices that can be made to create opportunities in classrooms for slowing down. It takes intentionality and planning, but when we privilege our goals for teacher candidates over the pressure to complete a curriculum, or as Kylene Beers and Robert Probst (2017) say, "[think] about how we measure success at a school . . . [by challenging] a deeply entrenched system of testing" (p. 112), we provide meaningful and long-lasting experiences that promote academic skills and authentic confidence. Of course, we privilege read-alouds and writing workshop as a reciprocal literacy experience that we know improves student writing outcomes (Layne, 2015). This was demonstrated with our "capture and release" (Bennett, 2007) approach which invited teacher candidates into open spaces that prioritized work that is meaningful to all students and encouraged the development of the whole learner.

The teacher candidates experienced a safe and successful writing workshop experience that allowed them to participate as a student, plan like a teacher, and express themselves like a writer. Going forward, we will emphasize the model more explicitly in our interactions with the teacher candidates, so they are better able to replicate and value the time it takes to create the whole writing workshop experience for their own learners. Mostly, as researchers, we will continue to emphasize the power of read-alouds as the central hub of the writing workshop.

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