

A Place for Talk in a Writers' Workshop

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Fifth grade teacher Erin Ciccone discovers the truth about her classroom's "Monday-morning gab sessions" when, amid student protests, she tries to replace the sessions with "serious work." Reevaluating, Ciccone comes to realize that these "gab sessions" are actually sessions of prewriting, planning, and thinking—all necessary components of strong writing.

I find that my students are my best teachers. Over the last three years, they have taught me a great deal. However, one lesson has come through loud and clear: students need to talk before they write. Although I found this idea revolutionary, Lucy Calkins has been writing about talking and listening for years. In her book *Living Between the Lines* (1991), she says that shared stories hold classrooms of writers together. Donald Graves, Ralph Fletcher, and Barry Lane have all written about the importance of storytelling. I stumbled upon the truth of this last year when my fifth-graders showed me how necessary it was for them to talk before attempting to write.

Time Wasted: Talking with My Students

In the past, on Monday mornings, my classroom—usually full of energy—was sleepy. Our schedule demanded that writing be taught first thing, but my students were not ready to write and, truthfully, I was not yet ready to teach a minilesson. So I would

close the door, and we would talk. It became our classroom tradition. The first thirty minutes of the week were devoted to large-group talking and listening. The topics usually were weekends, families, pets, and friends. I enjoyed this time immensely because I got to know my students. I felt guilty, however, about stealing valuable writing time to have our chats.

As the months wore on, I felt as though I were falling behind in my curriculum. I decided to sacrifice the Monday morning gab sessions. So one Monday morning, I simply began a minilesson. My students were not pleased. They begged to tell a weekend story. "Just one," they pleaded, but I refused. I conferenced with them that week as usual, but it was not a good week for writing in our room. One student, Tiffany, summed up the situation nicely when she complained in a letter to me that she had writer's block and that everything seemed wrong because no one had told stories on Monday. After talking with the class, we decided to reinstate Monday talks.

I agreed but put some structure into the sessions. I did not view this time as writing time, but rather as time necessary to maintain a positive classroom community. Although we were building a safe, comfortable classroom environment, I never realized that this was, indeed, writing time.

A New Model for Morning Chat: Headline News

The new structure took on a name, Headline News. As students entered the classroom on Monday mornings, they wrote personal headlines about their weekends. The rules were that the students had to have the headlines posted on sentence strips on the bulletin board before the day started. The headlines had to not only be true but also creatively written. As attendance and lunch count drew to a close, the class began to buzz about what they knew was soon to come. Some students would read the headlines and guess the stories behind them, while others would rehearse what they wanted to share with the class, with headlines such as, "Stranded at the Movie

A Place for Talk

Theater” or “Responsibility: I’m a Mother’s Helper.”

I would often share. One week my headline was about a weekend trip. It read, “Doylestown Woman Lost in New Jersey, Sustains Self on Tootsie Pops.” It was not a newsworthy story, but my students hung on my every word as I told about the bag of Tootsie Pops and the adventure of being so lost that even a McDonald’s could not be found for dinner. Most of the fifth-graders were excited about hearing tales of my life outside of room N-3, but I noticed that a few students were writing down ideas and thoughts as I talked. Next, another student shared and then another and another. We heard a story for each headline on the bulletin board, and each time there were some questions and more students jotting down ideas.

Writers’ workshop followed; the weeks ran smoothly. I praised my class for the strong voice I heard in their writers’ workshop pieces. I bragged to fellow teachers about the ease with which my students found topics in their lives for writing, and I rewarded organized, focused papers with sixes on the old holistic rubric.

It was not until I began reading about teaching writing that I realized that those morning gab sessions were responsible for this excellent writing. Whereas I thought we were “stealing” writing time to talk, we were really practicing the art of storytelling. We were prewriting, planning, and thinking. There was no drafting on those Monday mornings, but we did most definitely practice an integral part of the writing process. Because of those sessions, student writing was better organized, contained more distinct focus, had stronger voice, and, best of all, had my students thinking like writers.

Thinking Like a Writer: Topic Selection

In *A Writer’s Notebook: Unlocking the Writer Within You* (1996), Ralph Fletcher addresses the problem that students face with topic selection. He says there is something to write about everywhere. Finding a topic is simply a matter of learning to live like a writer.

Writers are like other people except for at least one important difference.

Other people have daily thoughts and feelings, notice this sky or that smell, but they don’t do much about it. All those thoughts, feelings, sensations, and opinions pass through them like the air they breathe. Not writers.

Writers record those things.

My students began to record thoughts, feelings, sensations, and opinions in their memories to share on Monday mornings.

Initially, I heard a great deal about soccer championships and new pets, but as the year progressed, other things—the things that make great writing—found their way into the headlines and then into our writing. About the same time, I began modeling the idea of looking for the small things in our lives and thinking like an author. One Monday, I shared a headline about wearing a backpack. I talked about using the backpack on a hike, but I spent the bulk of the time describing the feeling of the backpack and talking about my mind flashing back to college, camp counseling, and then high school and elementary school—all times when I wore a backpack. I called wearing my backpack a personal joy.

The following week, Will shared a headline about a spaghetti dinner: “A Tribute to the Person Who Invented Spaghetti.” He called spaghetti his personal joy. The precedent

had been set: small headlines could make great stories. Soon we had headlines about the way cats look when they are scared and shiny wood floors in relatives’ houses. Rarely did I hear students complain, “I have nothing to write about.” Instead, we learned that we can find things to write about in just about anything: “How to Fake a Stomachache”; “An Entire Weekend of Avoiding Chores.”

From Spoken Story to Written Tale: Voice

Pieces conceived during Headline News almost always showed a strong voice. This is not surprising given that students were allowed to actually speak the story before they wrote about it. What I did find surprising is that each student found his or her unique voice. Ralph Fletcher in *What a Writer Needs* (1993), Donald Graves in *Discover Your Own Literacy* (1991), Barry Lane in *After the End: Teaching and Learning Creative Revision* (1993) all address finding student voice. Keeping writers’ notebooks and listening to storytelling are suggested methods, and both are worthy practices, but the most effective method for capturing the elusive student voice is to let the students use their voices, literally, to tell stories before they write them. When students talk, they must find their voices in order to tell the story, and those voices find their way into writing, as well.

Sustaining the Audience’s Attention: Focus and Organization

Because we limited the amount of time for which each student was allowed to share (a maximum of about three minutes), students were forced to evaluate their stories and decide what was important and what was not important. Out of necessity, the pieces became focused. I developed

A Place for Talk

minilessons specifically about focus, but most students had already thought about the concept before we ever called it focus. They were interested in listening to stories that had a point and stuck to the topic in the headline. This came naturally out of talking.

Organization also became important as listeners became more demanding. When a story was initially told, the storyteller would be interrupted to clarify or to include important facts. Suspense and purposeful ambiguity were born when storytellers tried to make their stories a little different from the others. The order in which the story was told was critical. To further assist in organizing writing, students had the benefit of thinking about the story for an

entire day before they had to write it down. During this time, students slowly organized the pieces.

Our Headline News sessions—those thirty-minute gatherings every Monday morning—became the most valuable minutes of writing all week. As I read articles and books about writing, I see talking addressed repeatedly. It is akin to reading, writing, and listening. I will no longer feel guilty about using writing time for storytelling. As Lucy Calkins explains, storytelling is valuable. “Writers need this sense of fullness, of readiness to write, of responsiveness,” she writes. “It can come from storytelling, it can come from shared responses to literature. . . . However it comes, it’s terribly important” (1991).

References

- Calkins, Lucy. 1991. *Living Between the Lines*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
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