Writing Workshop and Real-World Learning: A Deweyian Perspective

Jo-Anne Kerr

In 1971 Janet Emig’s landmark study, *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders*, ushered in what is now commonly referred to as the “process approach” to teaching writing. Emig’s study and subsequent studies focusing on the processes that writers engage in, rather than on only the products they produce, began to inform pedagogy and, in part, gave rise to writing workshop, a type of writing class in which students learn to write by writing and by sharing their writing with others.

Whereas in traditional writing classes students are assigned topics and may only write one draft of a piece, in writing workshop students:

- write on topics of their own choosing,
- use sustained periods of time to work through multiple drafts of each piece, and
- elicit responses from one another and from the teacher.

These three ingredients — ownership, time, and response — are essential components of all writing workshops, allowing students to function as real writers while they concurrently develop their proficiency with written language.

Nancie Atwell is probably the best known writing workshop practitioner. *In the Middle: New Understandings about Writing, Reading, and Learning* (1998) details her model of writing workshop for middle-level learners. In her book, Atwell describes the importance of ownership, time, and response. For instance, she catalogues the variety of topics tackled by her students when she allowed them to write about ideas they generated themselves. For Atwell, allowing her students freedom of choice helps them take responsibility for learning about writing and about the devices and techniques available to writers (p.15).

Atwell also advocates the practice of providing frequent and regular time for writing, believing that time is important for helping students write well and for allowing them to consider and think through their ideas. Time helps student-writers produce clear, coherent, and logical writing (p. 91). Finally, Atwell asserts the importance of response for writers, noting that writers want to know how to improve themselves and desire response that will help them “forward” without “condescension” (p. 117).

It is generally acknowledged that ownership, time, and response allow students to act like real writers. Students produce a great deal of writing and, in the process, develop their writing skills. But there are other generally overlooked benefits to the workshop process which indicate a service that goes well beyond the context of writing workshop — and the context of school. In order to recognize this service, we can recast these three essential components of writing workshop in light of John Dewey’s philosophy of education, which puts particular emphasis on education as preparation for life. In doing so, it is then possible to “re-vision” writing workshop to see potential benefits for participants beyond improved student writing; in fact, writing workshop also helps students develop essential life skills.

Mrs. Malone’s Eighth-Grade Writing Workshop

In order to re-vision writing workshop’s essential components as fundamental life skills, we will take a look at one particular writing workshop.

Mrs. Malone’s writing workshop consisted of 21 eighth-graders: 11 girls and 10 boys representing a range of ability levels. Mrs. Malone was committed to a process approach to the teaching of writing and had wholeheartedly embraced a writing workshop format. Her overarching goal for her writing class was for students to see themselves as writers, and, accordingly, she incorporated ownership, time, and response into her class to help students realize this goal.

Mrs. Malone believes that students write best from their expressive center, and so she gave her students many opportunities to write what she called “personal projects,” pieces of writing on self-selected topics. She also values sustained periods of time for writing and so incorporated into her writing workshop periods of “quiet writing” which she gradually extended over the course of the year. Finally, seeing writing as a social endeavor, Mrs. Malone conferenced with students and gave them myriad opportunities to share their writing, with partners, in small groups, and with the class as a whole.

I observed Mrs. Malone’s writing workshop over a period of eight months. The following vignettes reflect what I observed and illustrate the dual services that writing workshop can provide: a preparation for real world writing and a preparation for life.
Ownership: Students Building Interactions With the Curriculum

As I wandered through the classroom, I noticed the afternoon sun streaming through the windows on this early spring day. I knew from experience that the room would soon grow hot — as much from the energy generated by the students as from the sun. I eventually settled near Amber, Suzanne, and Lisa, who were discussing what they would be working on today. Suzanne told Amber, "I'm going to write about my cousin's wedding. There's nothing else going on." Amber announced that she would be writing about the recent cheerleading competition in Williamsburg, Virginia. From another cluster of desks, I heard Michele talking about the story she was drafting. Here I witnessed the freedom that students enjoyed when working on what Mrs. Malone calls "personal projects."

While we know, intuitively and through scholarship and research, that better products can result when students are given this freedom (Atwell, 1998; Caulkins, 1994; Graves, 1994; Reif, 1992), there are additional benefits worth considering. Two pieces that Amber wrote suggest the value of allowing students to "own" their writing. Although Amber announced that she would write about the cheerleading competition, she ultimately wrote about an incident that occurred on the way home from Virginia. "The L.V. Cheerleading/ McDonald's Scandal" recounts the unsettling experience of being left behind at a restaurant on the way home. The bus had stopped at a McDonald's, and while Amber was on the phone, the bus left without her and another cheerleader. After waiting two hours, Amber and her friend were "rescued" by her friend's father. Amber vividly recalls in her piece the outrage she felt when she became aware that apparently no one on the bus realized that the two were missing. At the end of her account, told in diary form, she added this paragraph:

I hope you know my reason for writing this was completely selfish. I didn't write it to inform, or to badmouth cheerleading. I wrote it to help myself deal with the situation. I believe I'm a better person now and more understanding of these things (emphasis added).

In another piece Amber again implied her emerging understanding of the potential that writing has to help her understand and learn from her experiences when she wrote about the many moves that her family had been through. At one point in her narrative, she describes how she felt when she found that she would have to leave a school that she liked and the new friends that she had made: "No! We can't! I just got used to it here. Why does everything have to change?"

At the end of her piece, Amber wrote the following:

I didn't like moving at first, but now when I think about it, I think it really helped build my individuality and character. It helped me to become more well-rounded. I'm glad that I had the opportunity to move around. I sometimes wonder if, given the same opportunity, my friends would grow and mature in the ways I did.

Even the title Amber chose, "Moving: Good or Bad?" reflects her awareness of how her writing moved her to change how she felt about this experience. Writing gave her the time to think and a means by which to articulate this thinking, which then led to understanding and awareness.

Other students in Mrs. Malone's class also used writing to help them deal with difficult situations and to better understand particular facets of life. For instance, during the school year, a student who had quit school was hit by a truck and killed while she was walking along a highway not far from the school. A few students wrote about the death of this student when they were asked on their final exam to write about a situation that had occurred that year that had greatly influenced and/or changed them.

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Sam noted in his essay that on the day he heard about Beth's death he had been feeling sorry for himself, believing that he "had it bad at home." He wrote, "I didn't think in a million years that anything like this would or even could happen to a girl I knew." He went on to write that "it taught me that I didn't have life bad and that I shouldn't take it for granted because you never know when it might end.”
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Amber’s and Sam’s writing suggests that both students learned something about themselves, and this self-knowledge was possible because they “owned” their writing. Given this ownership, both students chose to write about their own situations, and, in doing so, were able to reflect on and analyze their experiences. Consequently, in addition to honing their writing skills through practice, Amber and Sam may also have discovered that writing can be a way of thinking through experience as well as a way of working toward solutions to problems.

What is the link between Amber’s and Sam’s pieces and John Dewey’s philosophy? For Dewey, education is a means by which individuals can learn how to lead fulfilling and informed lives and thus to be productive members of society. He believed that one of the goals of education is to prepare children to be able to participate in the “social consciousness of the race” (Dewey, 1972, p. 84). But education can provide this training only when students are able to build their own interactions with the curriculum. In writing workshop this interaction with the curriculum occurs when students “own” their writing — when, for example, they engage in creating “personal projects.”

As Amber and Sam begin to see writing as more than producing something, but also as a way of reflecting and gaining self-knowledge, they may extend their perceptions of writing to their lives outside school. As more reflective individuals with enriched views of writing, they may become more thoughtful members of society. In Dewey’s terms, Amber and Sam are learning to join the “social consciousness of the race” because they may be learning that writing is the act of producing texts while rendering one’s thoughts into language, thus making one’s thinking clearer. Certainly, reflective, thoughtful individuals are important to society; thus, students in Mrs. Malone’s writing workshop, while learning to be better writers, are also learning a skill which will help them participate more fully and productively in society.

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Time Management and Self-Governed Learning

After students shared their plans for the day, Mrs. Malone, standing in the middle of the room, announced, “Let’s have about 20 minutes of quiet writing time.” Students began riffling through their folders, shuffling papers, searching for pens and pencils. The room became silent, except for occasional whispers, the sound of crinkling paper and the quiet voices of Mrs. Malone and students conferencing. I heard Mrs. Malone tell a student that his draft was “coming along nicely.”

Students were at various stages of writing: some worked on first drafts; others appeared to be further along, while still others seemed to be in the throes of getting started. As I passed Ryan’s desk, I noticed he had drawn a cluster on a sheet of paper, in the center of which he had written “story with a 4-wheeler.”

Regardless of where they were in the process, students were being given an uninterrupted segment of time to work through their writing. Actually, Mrs. Malone and her students shared the management of time in writing workshop. Mrs. Malone managed time with regard to “quiet writing,” and some other workshop routines. Students, on the other hand, also managed time, choosing, for example, how long to spend on pieces and deciding how much time to devote to prewriting and drafting. As a result of this, we see students’ natural writing rhythms accommodated, with students proceeding at their own pace through the drafting process.

The manner by which time was managed in Mrs. Malone’s writing workshop is as important as ownership from the perspective of Dewey’s philosophy. Because
students were, to some degree, allowed to manage their own time, determining, for example, how long to spend on drafts, they were engaged in what Dewey calls a self-governed learning experience. Additionally, allowing students this autonomy meets another of Dewey’s beliefs about education—that classrooms should attempt to create learning conditions that are similar to those from which students will learn outside of school. In the world outside of school, individuals manage their own time and in doing so learn to use this time responsibly. They learn, without teacher-imposed deadlines and numerous reminders, that certain tasks have to be completed within a particular time frame, that they must arrive at work promptly, that it may be best to tackle difficult jobs first, that procrastination is counterproductive. Finally, Dewey states that education should result from the empowerment of the individual in a social situation. Students in Mrs. Malone’s writing workshop were empowered when they were allowed to manage their own time, and this empowerment allowed them to learn about their time needs as a writer and the importance of time for writing.

Because students were given the chance for a self-governed learning experience (using time as they chose), independent learning occurred. For one thing, the sustained periods of time that Mrs. Malone gave students helped them to learn on their own that good writing often takes a long time. This was not something that Mrs. Malone directly “taught,” yet some students articulated this knowledge when asked what they had learned in writing workshop. For instance, one student wrote that “you need to rewrite many, many times” and that “it [writing] takes a long time.” Another student wrote: “I learned how much time it [writing] takes.” Yet another student responded that writing takes “time and a good imagination.”

Student self-management of time in Mrs. Malone’s writing workshop requires that students be self-directed, taking responsibility and making choices for themselves. Such self-direction within the classroom is important, for it allows students to appreciate for themselves the goals they are working for. For Dewey, allowing students self-direction helps them meaningfully engage in the pursuit of goals while helping them develop the “moral life,” a component of which we might identify as a strong work ethic, which is, of course, an important life skill (Dewey, 1964, p. 131).

Response: Learning Social Cooperation

Mrs. Malone concluded the quiet writing time by announcing, “Let’s stop for a few moments and share writing with one another.” Students began moving around, settling in by the desks of peers, exchanging papers. While this sharing time took place, Mrs. Malone conferenced with students, asking questions like, “Can you explain how you got to the bottom of the mountain?”

Both the noise level and movement increased as students read, talked, responded, and wrote. A group of girls clustered around Ann’s desk, reading over her shoulders as she continued to work on her story. Brian and Sam were reading one another’s drafts; “Good ending,” said Brian. Bill, chair tilted precariously backward, was reading to Kurt the lead from his piece about a hospital stay. Heath asked Ron if he would read his draft.

Mrs. Malone announced a five minute break. Students gathered by the windows and in the back of the room to talk. A handful of students
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continued to write at their desks, one or two approached Mrs. Malone for conferences, and a steady stream of students took the hall pass hanging by the door on their way to the rest rooms.

Sharing writing was clearly a vital element in Mrs. Malone’s writing workshop, as students shared with the teacher in conferences as well as with classmates in peer groups. This sharing and response helped students improve their own writing while helping them develop life skills that they will use outside of school, now and in the future.

As an aid to better writing, it was apparent that conferences with Mrs. Malone and shared drafts with peers helped students learn about the importance of using details to engage readers. Further, by discussing their work with Mrs. Malone and with each other, these students developed and used a lexicon, or metalanguage, associated with writing. For instance, as students shared their drafts, they used words such as “lead,” “edit,” “revise,” “conclusion,” and “atmosphere.” Interestingly, these were not terms that Mrs. Malone taught her students didactically. Rather, students internalized this metalanguage and came to use it naturally as a result of hearing the terms in conferences, eventually applying these words to their own writing and to their peers’ writing.

The development of this metalanguage was also indicative of the social cooperation that was a vital component of Mrs. Malone’s writing workshop and, therefore, points to another service that writing workshop has the potential to offer its participants. Because writing is, to varying degrees, an interactive endeavor, students shared their writing at different stages of development. The sharing that occurred, and which led to the development and use of a metalanguage, allowed students to develop in their writing workshop a community of writers all engaged in a similar pursuit. Because of this common goal, students cooperated with one another — sharing their writing, offering suggestions to peers, collaborating on some assignments. The type of social cooperation that necessarily occurred in writing workshop will no doubt be a part of students’ lives outside of school. Serving on committees, collaborating in the workplace on projects, and cooperating in personal relationships all involve social exchange.

The social cooperation that occurred in Mrs. Malone’s writing workshop is relevant to Dewey’s views on social cooperation and what he calls cooperative classrooms. To Dewey, humans naturally wish to cooperate, possessing an inherent desire to contribute to collaborative endeavors. He also associates cooperative activity closely with democracy, maintaining that community is another name for democracy, for it presents to the members of a democratic society a chance to join on common projects, problems, and concerns. Dewey would consider the practice in social cooperation that occurs in writing workshop invaluable, not only for pragmatic purposes but also for more idealistic ones, such as enriching others through community.

While Dewey championed social cooperation, he also believed that the individual must develop personally and communally. In fact, he believed individual development could take place along side social cooperation. Dewey advocated rethinking the idea of individuality to accommodate the development of community. As the individual grows, learns, and develops, Dewey asserts that he or she is then able to better help others. For Dewey, social cooperation does not compromise individual growth; rather, the two work in tandem, resulting in personal and social benefits.

In Mrs. Malone’s writing workshop, individual learning and growth occurred as students shared their drafts and as they responded to their peers’ writing. This simultaneous personal and social development and learning was perhaps best described by a student who, when asked about the value of peer response, noted that she often learned something about her own writing, and how to revise and improve it, by helping peers revise and improve their writing.

**Conclusion**

In writing workshop, students not only have the opportunity to develop into proficient, confident writers, but they also have the chance to learn and develop life skills they can use to contribute to society. By building their own interactions with the curriculum, by engaging in self-governed learning experiences, and by interacting with peers in a community of learners, they are strengthening their self-confidence and ability to express themselves clearly to others.

Dewey’s theory helps us understand the larger benefits of Mrs. Malone’s writing workshop classroom. Her writing workshop illustrates that this forum presents students the opportunity to develop as writers, as individuals, and as members of a larger
community. As students develop their proficiency with written language in the context and environment of writing workshop, they are concurrently developing skills that will facilitate their full and informed participation in society.

References


Jo-Anne Kerr is a teacher consultant with the South Central Pennsylvania Writing Project. She teaches English at Ligonier Valley High School, Ligonier, PA.

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tions that come with claims of premature knowing. For 25 years Jim Gray has been vigilant in warning the California Writing Project and sites of the National Writing Project against embracing any fashionable theory of learning or teaching or any instructional reform — however promising or supported by research and theory — which might foreclose on alternative approaches and other answers put forward by a successful classroom teacher.

Even those of us who are intellectually committed to the writing project and who have taken it upon ourselves to articulate a theory for the model and practices that define the writing project have found Jim indifferent or hostile to any theoretical label we might be inclined to propose as a way of identifying what approach the writing project takes to improving the teaching of writing in schools. From Jim Gray's perspective — and it is a perspective we must be reminded of whenever we are inclined to waver from it — no label or school of thought can be applied to the writing project, if it threatens to make the Project less hospitable to the ideas and experience of some successful teacher whose practice is inconsistent with the labeled principles. The writing project has therefore assiduously refused to embrace such attractive and widely respected movements or pedagogical stances as constructivism or whole language, or critical pedagogy, or literature-based instruction. We must not become proponents of any of these, Jim would insist, if that might suggest that we are not open to whatever might represent its opposite and might be brought into our community by an experienced and thoughtful classroom teacher. For Jim Gray and those of us who remain faithful to the writing project model, the Project remains aggressively agnostic with respect to any approach that may be offered for school reform or instructional improvement, and yet militantly orthodox in its faith, first, in the capacity of teachers to continue learning from their own experience and from the wisdom of peers and, then, in the ultimate authority of teachers to determine for themselves what works and doesn't work in their own classrooms.

Fortunately, Jim has not allowed his retirement to remove him from the discourse of our community and he resides near at hand to advise and chastise us as we continue to define and refine the work of the writing project. He serves as a mentor to all of us, and we who have been privileged to work with Jim as site directors and Fellows of CWP sites remain, in our best professional moments, his protégés.

*Sheridan Blau directs the South Coast W.P.*