WHAT WORKS IN WRITING INSTRUCTION

Research and Practice

2nd Edition

Deborah Dean

Staff Editor: Bonny Graham
Production Editor: The Charlesworth Group
Interior Design: Jenny Jensen Greenleaf
Cover Design: Pat Mayer
Cover Image: Composite of iStock.com/Scar1984, iStock.com/carduus, iStock.com/Happy_vector

NCTE Stock Number: 56810; eStock Number: 56827
ISBN 978-0-8141-5681-0; eISBN 978-0-8141-5682-7

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Dean, Deborah, 1952- author.
Title: What works in writing instruction : research and practice / Deborah Dean, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT.
Description: Second Edition. | Champaign, Illinois : National Council of Teachers of English, [2021] | First edition: 2010. | Includes bibliographical references and index. | Summary: "Using teacher-friendly language and classroom examples, Deborah Dean helps answer the frequently asked questions high school teachers have about teaching writing, sifting through the most recent and reliable research and providing accessible recommendations"—Provided by publisher.
Identifiers: LCCN 2020047226 (print) | LCCN 2020047227 (ebook) | ISBN 9780814156810 (Trade Paperback) | ISBN 9780814156827 (Adobe PDF)
Subjects: LCSH: English language—Composition and exercises—Study and teaching (Secondary)
Classification: LCC LB1631 .D2945 2021 (print) | LCC LB1631 (ebook) | DDC 808/.0420712—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2020047226
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2020047227

Contents

Preface to the Second Edition

The world is full of magic things, patiently waiting for our senses to grow sharper.

—*W. B. Yeats*

When good ideas go to school, they sometimes get shoved into rows of desks and lines of a grade book that might not be the best place for them.

You know the feeling, right? We go to a conference, talk to a colleague, read a new book or journal article, and learn about a new instructional strategy that sounds really promising, sounds like it will benefit our students. But then, when we try it, it doesn't actually turn out the way we thought it would. I'm not the only teacher who's had that experience, right?

In 2007, I was anticipating the *Writing Next* report, commissioned by Carnegie Corporation of New York and published by the Alliance for Excellent Education, which reviewed twenty-five years of research and found eleven evidence-based instructional practices that actually improved student writing. What would it say? I was hoping for something revolutionary. But, when the report came out, I didn't see anything really new; the ideas sounded like what I had been reading in journals and hearing at conferences. My lack of surprise at the report's findings wasn't unique to me. In fact, when I shared the report with a room full of teachers, I noticed a group at one table getting ready to leave. When I approached them, they said, "We already do those things, and they aren't working. If that's what the research says, it doesn't tell us anything new. It doesn't help us."

I wasn't so different from those teachers. I, too, had wondered why my integration of these effective practices hadn't always gotten the results the research seemed to promise. It could be that I had chosen a bad first day (first snow of the season!). It could have been all the disruptions (multiple random announce-

ments, a fire drill, and four kids called to the office—separately), all on the day that I wanted to try my new idea. It could simply have been that someone in class was having a bad day—a fight with parents, a breakup, who knows—and that student's attitude had spread through the class. None of these aspects of a real-life classroom seemed to be represented in the research reports or the idealized classrooms I read about in books.

But, in looking deeper, I also realized that sometimes I hadn't really understood the new idea, that I hadn't really implemented the idea the way it was intended to be implemented. It might be that I hadn't realized the depth of background knowledge or skills that students would need to implement the new practice. Maybe I hadn't anticipated the ways that the new practice worked against norms of practice students expected from school. It could be that I hadn't anticipated the social development a practice required as part of its effectiveness, social development that might not have occurred yet among a group of students. There are just so many reasons a new idea might go astray, might not work the first time we try it, might not get the results we hoped for.

But if you, like me, have persisted, sometimes we've found our way into implementing the new idea in a way that did get at the benefits we hoped for our students. Some ideas, like sentence combining or writing process, just took me a long time to get right. I had to believe and keep trying and tweaking. And that taught me something, too: good ideas might need time to grow into their full potential. Time for students, but also time for me to figure it out. Writing development is slow—like glacier-moving slow—and sometimes our implementation of new instructional strategies needs time to grow into that process, too.

When I was teaching junior high, I was assigned an *eight-basic class*—students identified as two or more grade levels below their assigned grade level. My class was almost all boys, and several of them were nonnative English speakers. One of these students was Joon. Although Joon spoke some English, his parents didn't speak any, so I couldn't communicate with them. At all, except through Joon.

Additionally, it was hard to see Joon as a writer. Mostly what I saw in him was anger. He was always angry. One day, I had to move everyone out of the classroom while Joon had an anger-management issue that involved knocking desks around. It lasted about fifteen minutes, and, when I stood beside him while he spoke on the phone to his parents about the incident, I had no idea what he said to them about it. Still, I tried new instructional practices with each of these writers—portfolios and authentic writing experiences that I hoped would help them develop as writers.

The next year, our school (thankfully) no longer separated students by reading levels, and Joon was assigned to one of my ninth-grade classes. During fourth quarter, we read *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and students wrote about the novel in an ABC book format—twenty-six pages, a paragraph and image on each page about the characters, themes, symbols, and plot events in the novel. No small task. I scaffolded the project for students, but it was still a big job and one that students felt very proud of completing.

On the due date, Joon came to class a few minutes late, with a bundle of wet papers. He seemed distressed, so I asked him to bring the papers and come with me to the teacher workroom. As we walked, he explained. He had forgotten his ABC book at home that morning and had ridden his bicycle home to get it at lunch. His parents were at work, so he'd had to climb on the roof and through a window to get inside. Racing back to school so that he wouldn't be late, he had lost his grip on his ABC book, and it had flown out and apart, all over the road. This was the Northwest: water, puddles, mud. We spread his pages out across the tables in the workroom so they could dry. I told him not to worry but to come back after school.

When I returned to the workroom a few hours later, the papers were dry—a little wilted and dirty, but dry. As I gathered them in order, I scanned the paragraphs and began to cry. The thinking was insightful. The writing was effective. When Joon knocked on the door and saw the tears in my eyes, he looked down at his ABC pages in my hands and then back up at me, a question in his eyes. I said, "Joon, do you know how proud I am of what you've accomplished? You did really good thinking and writing here!" He seemed to get embarrassed at that, but he was pleased, too.

Years. That's how long it took.

Writing is a complex and difficult process. Its effectiveness—and its creator's effectiveness—depends on genre, audience, time, and so much more. Effective writing instruction is also a complex and difficult process. It depends on our attitudes and beliefs about students and writing. It depends on the students in our classes, on what is happening in the world, on how we feel about writing in general and a specific writing challenge specifically. Our beliefs about evidence-based practices, in fact, contribute a large part to how effectively they might be implemented in our classes—as much as 30 percent of the variance in effect (Graham and Perin, "What"). That means that, if teachers believe something isn't appropriate for their students, it probably won't work as well when they try it. If a teacher believes a practice seems too hard to implement or doubts if it really will work, the practice is less likely to achieve the results it could possibly get. Additionally, if a teacher doesn't feel confident about a practice (and how confident can we be at first?), that also has an impact on effective

implementation. Teachers' inservice and preservice preparation can influence the implementation of evidence-based practices. So, despite all the research, a teacher needs to believe in a practice—believe it can help *their* students—and be willing to try it, maybe more than once.

While I was teaching the eight-basic class I mentioned earlier, I read about using portfolios to help student writers write more (without me having more to grade) and to help them take control over their writing. I wanted that for my student writers—all of them. So I tried using portfolios, at least a version of the idea, in that class of writers who hadn't felt a lot of success as writers. We were writing personal narratives. I had introduced the writing with a lengthy brainstorm during which students made long lists of possible stories from their lives. Then, each day, we would read a mentor text aloud in class, talk about what the writer had done, choose one of the topic options from our list, and write. They knew they would get points for writing, not for the quality, and these students liked that idea. I had a few requirements: they had to write at least a page and try one idea we'd seen in the narrative we'd read that day. Some of them suddenly developed much larger handwriting, but they wrote.

After we had five different drafts, I introduced the revision aspect of the task: they could choose one of their narrative drafts to revise and that one would get a grade, but we would work through the revision process together. Who would believe that portfolios would benefit these writers whose prior "writing" experiences had consisted almost entirely of filling out worksheets? I took a chance, and students responded positively. It wasn't perfect, but it was forward movement for these writers. My experience with these students, so early in my career, taught me that I could never really write off a practice just because my students might seem less developed as writers. Or not as interested. Instead, I found that, the more I trusted in them, the better they responded. That doesn't mean my first attempts always succeeded.

In *Strategic Writing*, I counseled that peer feedback of writing doesn't always work well the first time, or the third time, or the seventh time teachers try it, but that they should keep trying. Peer feedback *will* benefit developing writers, but it's a challenging practice that requires time, patience, and teaching to get what we want from it. One of the outside reviewers said of the manuscript that no one should promote an idea that doesn't work the first time we try it. The editor asked me what I thought about that comment, and I told him that the reviewer must not ever have been a secondary teacher: lots of good ideas take time to get them to work well—both teachers and students are learning as we implement. He chuckled. But I was serious. Trying out a new practice, when we know others say it can work, takes belief that we can make it work. And persistence.

It also takes flexibility on our part to make good ideas work. Implementation of evidence-based practice isn't a cookie-cutter practice. Every classroom is different. Teachers know that second period doesn't respond the same way fifth period does—and sometimes we have to adjust our teaching practices for those differences. The same thing is true for our work implementing the practices recommended from research. We have to adapt, tweak the practice so that it fits us, too. But sometimes, when something doesn't work the first time, we get discouraged. We might feel the same attitude Sarah Brooks expressed in a surprising article that *English Journal* once published: "Why I Detest Nancie Atwell." I have to admit to feeling some of the frustration Brooks expressed about writers workshop, an effective practice I have never been able to implement exactly the way Atwell describes it. In general, the article's title exemplifies the way many teachers feel about books based on evidence-based practices: the practices they tout may not work exactly as described in the books or articles, so we come to detest the researchers or the practices. "They don't work for *my* students." Or worse, before we even try: "That will never work in *my* class." But as Brooks noted, as we adapt to OUR students and OUR situations, improvements do come. Students do become better writers.

However, there's another wrinkle. When I read that first analysis of research in 2007, I was looking for an answer to a question I had been asking myself since I started teaching: "What works in writing instruction?" That report gave me some answers, but, as I noted, several of them didn't work as well as the evidence suggested they would when it came to *my* classrooms. While reviewing the newer research that's come out since that 2007 report, I noticed an interesting thread: caveats that there is no guarantee that these practices will work in every classroom. What?! Isn't this research about practices that have been studied and found to improve writing? Instead, the researchers seemed to be acknowledging that there is no way to know which practices need to be emphasized for the particular students we teach; teachers need to make adaptations for their individual situations. In some ways, these comments feel frustrating. I want to know What Works! I want a definitive answer! What I eventually learned to see, though, was the confidence that these researchers are placing in teachers. Repeatedly they urge teachers to consider and adapt the practices they have found to have benefit. They acknowledge that the practices don't come with guarantees, but implementing the practices can improve what we do. Maybe not all at once, but eventually.

So, this new research trusts us and our instincts. It says teachers know their students and those students' needs. It values our professionalism, our ability to consider evidence-based practices and then to make informed, confident

decisions about what would be best practice for *our* students. I like that. I like the confidence of that perspective. So, instead of feeling discouraged that I haven't found one answer to my career-long question—"What works in writing instruction?"—I feel confident that this research gives me ideas and options, and then trusts me to make the adaptations to my instructional practice that I think will benefit my students the most. And to keep adjusting that process as I teach different groups of students. Hard? Yes. Rewarding? Yes. And that matters. And it is exactly the process that research has found exemplary teachers use: "These teachers put every lesson through the 'my students' test. It's the test that teachers use to adapt, enliven, bump up, or otherwise tailor the curriculum for the students at hand" (Murphy and Smith 211). Teachers know when a practice works, when writers enjoy writing and are developing their sense of "self as a writer." Teachers know when students are improving as writers. Teacher knowledge and experience matter.

But, yes, we have to think of complications. One is time. Of course. As teachers, we know that there is never enough time. And a lot of these practices mean that students need *more* time for writing, more instructional elements added to an already-full schedule. We still have all the other things we have to teach. How do we find the time we need for pumping up writing? One answer could be what I call *layering*: making most of what we do work for multiple goals, intentionally. As we can see from the results in the combined research reported here, we can use writing when we are learning about other content—improve learning and develop writing skills at the same time. We can use sentence combining to relate to other reading in the course. We can find ways to make our practices work for multiple objectives and get the time we need.

We also have to remember that change takes time, too. Change—for us and for our students—takes time. As we implement new instructional practices, we have to be careful not to expect immediate results, sudden changes in our writers. When I finally gave writer's notebooks a chance—an "I'm-all-in" kind of chance, not the haphazard one I had been giving it—I saw results. Near the end of the school year. Maybe some signs earlier, but, really, it took most of the year to see the benefits of the practice.

The title of this book—*What Works in Writing Instruction*—is framed as a kind of answer to the question of the same words I mentioned earlier. And it's an important question, one I have asked myself hundreds of times over the years. Whenever I thought I might have an answer, I still had to reshape my practices for the next group of students with their specific needs. Research tells us some things, but research isn't always thinking about the specifics of our classrooms. About Joon. Or Kevin. Or Savannah. Something that may work in the research might have to be adapted to work in the sophomore composition class of forty

students I taught, or in the eighth-grade class of forty my friend currently teaches. Research alone might not adequately address the concerns when nearly half my class has English as their second language. Or when the district mandates the curriculum (at least the units), as mine did, or when the grade-level team has the "units" already planned and sequenced so that all the teachers teach them together, as a friend found when she transferred to a different school.

The practices that research supports are the start, and teachers—the ones whose hearts and heads are in the room with the students—are the final arbiters of what works. Their good professional judgment and their adaptations of the evidence-based practices are the real answer to what works. They are the ones who can truly turn the ideas from research into the practices that work to develop skilled writers. So, even though this book addresses the evidence-based practices that improve writing, I also acknowledge that teachers are the real answer to the question of what works.

In the first edition of *What Works*, I shared what I learned as I looked beneath the headlines of the *Writing Next* report, the foundations of the eleven evidence-based practices for writing instruction that research identified. I hoped I could find the details that matter to make each of the practices effective, the small tweaks I could make in my instruction to get the results I hoped to get, the results research suggests I should be able to see. Not just for me, though. For other teachers, too. The first edition helped me (and other teachers, I hope) consider how to bump up our existing instructional practices to move closer to getting the results we hoped we could get: more confident and competent writers. In my inquiry for the first edition, I discovered principles that matter to each of the practices, principles that I didn't always pay attention to when I thought I was implementing the practices. Those principles helped me improve my use of the practices and guided the way I organized the first edition: eleven effective practices, one practice per chapter, three principles per practice. We had a start to the answer to our question of what works.

But, in their first synthesis of the research, Graham and Perin had an important caveat: this research only looked at certain types of studies and couldn't be interpreted as a full answer. For one thing, they explained, we don't know the optimal mix of the elements and would need to consider other research. Graham and Perin acknowledged that many elements that contribute to effective writing instruction have not been researched—so they don't show up in their report. In other words, other practices matter, too. Practices that might be hard to research as they are harder to measure in traditional ways because they might be idiosyncratic. So the *Writing Next* report was never meant, even by the researchers, to be the answer to everything we wondered about writing instruction. It was a start, though. Since 2007, Graham (with a variety of other researchers) has published

more answers, synthesizing research of all types to try to answer the question I've asked my whole career: What works? The answer we have now from this additional research is much rounder, much fuller, than that first report more than ten years ago.

What all this new research meant for this revised edition is that I couldn't just update the earlier manuscript. I couldn't just add on to each chapter—an addendum, as one colleague suggested—to say, essentially, "That was how it was in 2007, and here's how it is more than ten years later." The new research, to me, was like looking through a kaleidoscope: each small shift creates a different image. Because of the nature of this new research, I had to rethink the whole book, to see the research in fuller ways that were more reflective of the messiness of a writing classroom than the more academic approach the first edition had featured. This rethinking was a lot like that kaleidoscope I described—constantly shifting and reshaping.

So, how did I get from that first edition to this one? First, I took all the instructional practices named in the 2007 *Writing Next* report and listed them in a column. Then I read all the research since and listed those findings. I had the idea that I would just merge the two lists—but the ideas did not group easily. I would make one grouping, and then see something that made me shift my perspective, so I'd make another one. This happened multiple times. (Remember the kaleidoscope?) Finally, I gave the lists to teachers I trust and asked them to group the ideas. We all came up with different groupings! Instead of being discouraged—although I admit I was a little discouraged at first—this practice taught me something. It reinforced the ways these effective practices interact with one another in a variety of ways. I eventually settled on a grouping—five groups of ideas broadly connected that seem to address some of the themes of the research.

When I started writing the chapters, though, my ideas about the connections shifted, and shifted, and shifted again. (There was that kaleidoscope again!) Tables I.1 and I.2 present the first and fifth groupings, to give some idea of the evolution of my ideas and the connections I saw as possibilities. I share these two lists to show that I see other ways the evidence-based practices relate to one another, in order that readers who are wondering can see that I considered other possibilities. I also share the progression because I think my evolution through the ideas is similar to the ways teachers use evidence-based practices—adapting them, pulling in the parts that make sense at one time, adding bits and making adjustments as needed for their own situations—and that is exactly how this process should work.

As I drafted and became aware of the overlaps and interconnectedness of the elements of effective writing instruction, I wrestled with whether this was

even going to work. There were so many overlaps! For example, effective strategy instruction relies on a positive classroom climate so that students feel comfortable trying out new strategies. Strategy use is also affected by meaningful assignments—how do writers learn strategies unless they are writing something that matters? The powerful connection between reading and writing is essential to the effective use of mentor texts in the writing classroom. And sentence combining—to work the way it should—uses the reading–writing connection and requires the risk-taking we only find in supportive classroom communities. Feedback fits in three different chapters. I could go on and on, but you get the picture. All the pieces interact. I had to make some breaks, but I recognize that they are somewhat artificial. They are idiosyncratic. And so, in this edition of *What Works in Writing Instruction*'s chapters, I often refer to ideas in other chapters. I can't help it—the ideas simply don't exist in isolation.

TABLE I.1. What Works in Writing Instruction: First Grouping

Chapter	Old research	New research
Climate	Collaboration	High/realistic expectations Adapting Praise Supportive, pleasant environment Teacher enthusiasm/modeling Celebrate success Choice Ownership Encourage independence Sharing
Structures	Process Writing to learn Inquiry Prewriting	Time Meaningful assignments Predictable routines Frequent/sustained writing
Practices	Strategy	Meaningful assignments Self-monitoring Reflection Scaffolding Mini-lessons Explicit teaching Write for multiple purposes Self-assessment
Content	Sentence combining Summarizing Models Product goals	Integrate reading and writing Different genres Consider audience
Tools	Word processing	

TABLE I.2. What Works in Writing Instruction: Fifth Grouping

Chapter	Old research	New research
Climate	Collaboration	High/realistic expectations Sharing Peer assistance Praise Supportive, pleasant environment Teacher enthusiasm/modeling
Structures	Process Inquiry Prewriting Word processing	Time Predictable routines Frequent/sustained writing Meaningful feedback Ownership
Practices	Strategy	Reflection Scaffolding Goal setting Explicit teaching Self-assessment Feedback Adapting Encourage independence
Content	Sentence combining Summarizing Writing to learn	Integrate reading and writing Basic skills Knowledge about words
Tasks	Models Product goals	Write for multiple purposes Meaningful assignments Text structures Genres Mini-lessons Consider audience/purpose Rubrics Choice

Moreover, in this edition, to give voice to all the practices that now have evidence to support them, I have chosen a more organic chapter structure, one that is more reflective (I hope!) of the way classroom practices actually get implemented. I hope that this organization allows teachers to find a practice inside a chapter, learn about it, and apply it—or use the combination of practices as a whole and consider that as a goal for improving writing instruction in their classes. I hope this structure is helpful to teachers—that it reinforces the good choices they are making and gives them some ideas for what next steps they can take.

Features of This Edition

Sketchnotes

I had read about sketchnotes in several sources, watched some video posts about them, and seen them in use in a variety of settings when writers were trying to synthesize ideas. I was intrigued, but I'm not much of an artist, so I hadn't done much with the idea except admire other people's attempts. However, when it came time to begin drafting the chapters for this book, I found myself with big piles of information for each section; when I tried a traditional outline, I had trouble making it work. So, finally, I tried my hand at sketchnotes. While my art is still not good, sketchnoting allowed me to find the relationships among the ideas of each chapter. Sketchnotes don't work in the same way as outlines—they didn't necessarily provide me with the step-by-step order for a chapter, but they provided enough structure that I could see my way into drafting the ideas. I have included them herein, near the beginning of each chapter, in hopes that they show some of my thinking process, how I envision the ideas in that chapter and their connections. I think I learned from doing them how I might help students use this important strategy. Please pardon the weak drawing skills.

Research Toolbox

"Sketchnoting is visible thinking that includes words and pictures:

- Sketchnoting honors thinking through offering choice.
- Sketchnoting supports increased memory and focus.
- Sketchnoting promotes deceleration and relaxation.
- Sketchnoting is intentional, designed thinking.

"Yes, sketchnotes are more than just a pretty page" (McGregor 11).

Window into a Classroom

As I reviewed the evidence-based practices, I realized that many teachers across the country—me, my friends, and teachers I follow through social media—are implementing these practices and sharing their experiences. I love seeing the different ways teachers have perceived the practices as being beneficial for their students and have adapted them to meet their specific needs. I want to share those adapted implementations with readers because those applications get at a very important point of all of the ideas in the book: that the big ideas—the evidence-based practices—are abstractions. They become real when we see real teachers making them work in real classrooms. Thus, the Window into a Classroom pieces are examples of one teacher's way of applying an evidence-based practice. Not the right way. Not the only way. Just one way. And I hope that

Window into a Classroom

Angela Faulhaber shared a year-end assignment she designed by combining practices from several teachers who had shared their ideas online. Students read verse novels in book groups, discussing them as they read. Then they observed a podcast (*The Slowdown*) as a mentor text and created podcasts of their own, focusing on one of the poems from their books. Finally, students listened to one another's podcasts and made sketchnotes of each one. In this single assignment, the students read, wrote, discussed, studied mentor texts, considered audience and purpose, worked as a community and as individuals within it, and used writing to learn, as well as probably several other evidence-based practices. This is a perfect classroom example of how really WOW teachers are using these practices to help students learn and develop as writers (and learners).

looking through the window into other classrooms inspires readers to consider how they might adapt an evidence-based practice—not in just exactly the same way, but in a way that fits each teacher and each classroom.

Challenges

I was reminded of the need to consider challenges to effective practices recently when I was presenting to a group of student teachers in a seminar they attend during their student teaching experience. I was reviewing what they had learned in their preservice courses about writing instruction. As I reviewed writing workshop principles and practices, one student raised her hand: "My teacher doesn't do that. In fact, she hardly does any of these things." I saw several other students nodding their heads, and a part of me bristled at the implied sense of superiority over their cooperating teachers. "How many students are in the class you're teaching?" I asked. The student's reply, "Forty," was all I needed to launch into my speech about adapting evidence-based practices to our specific situations. When a class is so full of students and desks that it's hard to move around, teachers are limited in how much they can implement. The best teachers, I explained, always have to adapt, and ask questions like "In my situation, with these students, what are the principles of this practice I *can* implement?" and "How can I adapt it for this class, for these students?"

Right then, as we discussed the principles embedded in writers workshop, I pushed students to articulate the specific challenges of very large classes and how they might adapt evidence-based practices for those situations. We might not be able to implement a practice all just the way we read about it or the way researchers implemented it, but we can think about how we might begin to implement it, to choose a piece or a part that might benefit these students or this class. So, in this edition of *What Works in Writing Instruction*, as I discuss evidence-based practices, I pause at times to consider some challenges that might be common to implementation of the practice. I am sure I can't even think of all the possible challenges, but I hope that periodically modeling that thinking of how to adapt to a potential challenge might help readers as they consider the challenges they have in their own situations. As I review some ways to adapt a

practice for a challenge I identify, I hope I can give ideas for how teachers might address the challenges unique to their own situations.

Research Toolboxes

Although I read a lot of different kinds of research in preparing to write this book, I have tried to limit the direct references to those sources in many ways. Mostly, I wanted this second edition to feel more like a conversation among teachers than the academic presentation of the first edition. Since the research findings are repeated in multiple places in these foundational sources and most recommendations are not unique to any single one, I felt it would be okay to refer to "research" with the understanding that the body of work listed in the following Research Toolbox (in rough chronological order, and with full bibliographical details given in the Works Cited section at the end of the book) is what I mean when I say that. I want teachers to know the foundational sources—the meta-analyses of different kinds of research—of the past few decades that helped me identify the evidence-based practices discussed in this book.

Research Toolbox

- *Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools* (Graham and Perin)
- "A Meta-Analysis of Writing Instruction for Adolescent Students" (Graham and Perin)
- "What We Know, What We Still Need to Know: Teaching Adolescents to Write" (Graham and Perin)
- "A Meta-Analysis of Single Subject Design Writing Intervention Research" (Rogers and Graham)
- *Effective Writing Instruction for All Students* (Graham)
- *Informing Writing: The Benefits of Formative Assessment* (Graham et al.)
- "Teaching Writing to Middle School Students: A National Survey" (Graham et al.)
- "Formative Assessment and Writing: A Meta-Analysis" (Graham et al.)
- "Research-Based Writing Practices and the Common Core: Meta-Analysis and Meta-Synthesis" (Graham et al.)
- "A Path to Better Writing: Evidence-Based Practices in the Classroom" (Graham and Harris)
- *Teaching Secondary Students to Write Effectively* (Graham et al.)
- *Handbook of Writing Research* (MacArthur et al.)
- "A Writer(s)-within-Community Model of Writing" (Graham)
- *The Lifespan Development of Writing* (Bazerman et al.)
- "Reading for Writing: A Meta-Analysis of the Impact of Reading Interventions on Writing" (Graham et al.)
- "Evidence-Based Practice in Writing" (Graham and Harris)
- *Best Practices in Writing Instruction* (Graham et al.)

When I wrote this book, I began with the list of evidence-based practices, and then I wrote about them in the way that I would talk to teachers I know, the ones I often work with in my career now. I rely a lot on my own teaching experience, but I also know that much of my own teaching experience is based on the reading I've done and the people I have learned from over the course of my career. These important people find a voice through my teaching experiences, in the ways I've interpreted their work for my own students. From time to time, I bring in the voices that matter the most to me, the ones I can directly link to my understanding of a principle. I include those voices, too, as a way for readers to go deeper into a topic, to learn more about an aspect of our conversation, if they desire. To that end, I list some of those voices I have used indirectly in Research Toolboxes sprinkled through the book. However, even when I don't quote from them directly, these voices have influenced my thinking, and I want to acknowledge them—and thank them for how they have influenced my teaching over the years. I hope they will continue to help future teachers, too. And I apologize because I know I have probably missed some of the influential voices that have helped shaped me as a teacher. If you are one of those, please know that your work matters.

One of my favorite writing teacher quotes comes from Vicki Spandel. She says, "Revision is about change, not mutilation. When your hair gets mussed, you don't shave your head" (85). I think something similar is true in writing instruction: we have days when our "hair gets mussed," metaphorically speaking. But we don't give up on everything because something isn't working the way we want it, because we are having a rough day, or week, or unit. We get out our brush, or comb, or curling iron—maybe we try a new style—but we keep our hair. That's what the new research is about—it's about finding the answers for when our hair gets mussed or we need an updated style.

So, here we go. To a kind of answer. The best kind: the kind of answer we get to shape for our students and our situation. Enjoy.

1

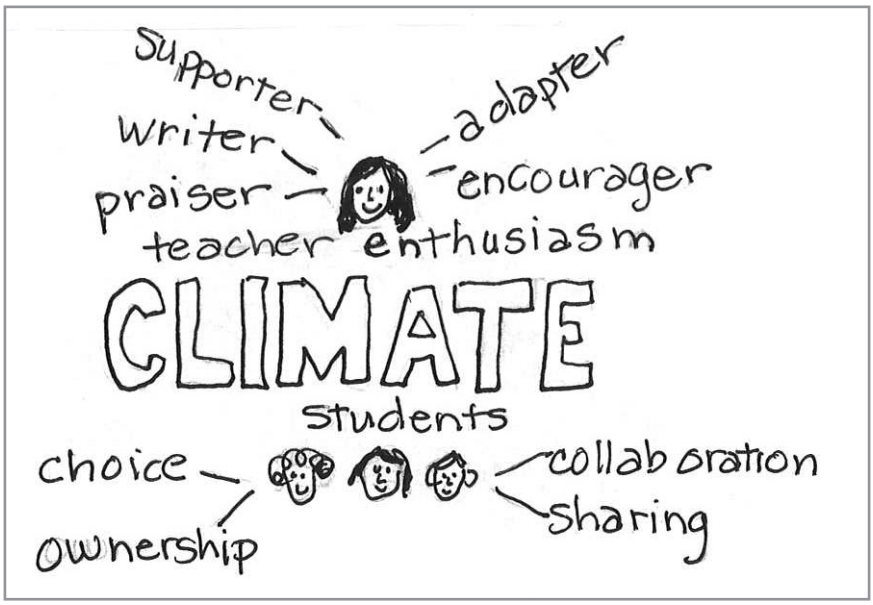
Climate

Trust is a precondition for student success.

—Jim Fredricksen

One day when I was teaching junior high, a student returned from an extended illness. He was a conscientious student, and his mother had requested his homework during his absence. On the day of his return to school, he came up to my desk and handed me the work he'd completed. Then he held both his arms out in front of him, in a position that looked like he anticipated my putting a heavy load onto them. "Okay," he said, "give me the next assignment." We both laughed, but I still remember that moment.

A few years later, a former student caught me during my bus duty—on the sidewalk in front of the school. He said something about how he had learned a lot in my class and enjoyed it. But then he said something that gave me a jolt. One thing he remembered from my classes was how we'd turn in big assignments at the beginning of class and then start right into the next one. "I guess that's how we got so much done," he said. Was that the takeaway I wanted my students to have? Yes, there was a lot to do, a lot to teach and learn. I could rationalize that writing is challenging and so we must do a lot of it in order to improve. We had no time to waste, right? But his comment made me realize that I had often failed to acknowledge what the students had accomplished as writers. I just kept them moving to the next writing. I hadn't thought much about how my decisions might have strained the culture I was trying to create, a culture that I knew instinctively was a necessary part of a strong writing community. It took me a while, but I gradually improved in acknowledging the writers in my classrooms as writers and people. And that acknowledgment is a huge part of building a classroom climate conducive to the most effective writing instruction.



Classroom climate begins with the teacher—and it begins even before we walk through the classroom doors. It begins by our being writers ourselves. Let me share an example of how this works.

I was trying to figure out how to write this book. I had pages and pages of notes, along with stacks of books and articles piled on the tables and floor around me. I had made several versions of outlines. I had a deadline! I really wanted to write this book. But I was stuck.

Then I remembered that I needed to make a pot of soup for some neighbors—and cookies for a meeting. I decided to cook first and then settle into the writing in the afternoon. I convinced myself that I would be able to write then.

Afternoon. I was home alone, with a warm fire going to counter the snow falling outside the window, and all my chores done. Everything was perfect.

But I couldn't write.

I couldn't start. I couldn't think of a word! So I decided to catch a show a friend had recommended on Netflix—just one episode, I told myself, to unwind, and then I would start. Before I knew it, I was binge-watching the show until night, when it was really too late to begin to write.

The following Monday, when I was back in class with my preservice teachers, discussing inquiry strategies (ironically) both for their future teaching and for their own early-stage writing, one of my students asked how we get ourselves started, how we make ourselves (and our students) write when it's hard.

I gave the answer I usually give: we need to ask ourselves why we are having trouble. It's usually one of just a few things:

- Could it be the blank page—all that white space—bringing on fear? Remember that we don't have to start at the beginning; we can start with what we know and feel comfortable with instead.
- Could it be that we don't know our subject or our genre well enough and that lack of knowledge is holding us back? Maybe we need to do more inquiry or restudy our mentor texts.
- Could it be the assignment isn't appealing? Sometimes, finding a way in to an unappealing assigned writing task can help us around the block.

I felt satisfied that I had answered my student's question well—and then, suddenly, I realized that I wasn't being totally honest. Those were the stock answers I give—and they solve most early writing problems—but none of them was the reason I couldn't write over the weekend. I had still been unable to write, even when I had the perfect time, and space, and preparation.

I paused and then confessed to my students: in my own current writing project, I had been in that same spot, but none of those answers had helped me. Instead, I had used so many avoidance strategies, ending up with Netflix binge-watching, that I had not written at all over the weekend, despite my own goals, my own desires, and my own experience as a writer. I felt embarrassed to share my experience (I wasn't a very good example), and then one student burst out: "This just makes me feel so much better about you and about myself as a writer!" I had to explain to them that I still had a deadline and would still, eventually, write what I needed to write, but I also needed to show them that, sometimes, experienced writers also feel the fear of the page, the reluctance to begin. Sometimes we just don't know why it's so hard.

As it turns out, my experience as a writer made my advice to my students more authentic: I had worked through my own problem and they felt confident that they could work through theirs, too. They referred to this moment several times during the semester. When students know their teachers are writers, know that we are going through many of the same issues and emotions they are, they feel like part of a community, and they can have more confidence in the advice and suggestions we give.

When teachers are writers, we understand all the emotions and challenges—and joys!—of writing that our students experience. I know that I feel a lot more compassion for my students when they feel writing-challenged because I have had that same feeling. I can also celebrate with them when they (and I) overcome

Research Toolbox

Articles by a variety of authors in the December 2017 issue of *Voices from the Middle* reinforce the idea of teachers as writers. For example: "In the classroom of a teacher who sees writing not as an assignment to be taught but as an act that naturally resists uniformity, there is room for discovery, room for experimentation, and room for individuals to discover who they are as a writers and what works for them" (Anderson and Kraushaar 49). (See also Rief.)

those challenges inherent in writing. Because I am a writer, they can trust me and my advice. And, because I am a writer who believes that all of us are writers who can overcome our writing challenges, they can know that, even with some detours for binge-watching (as long as it doesn't go on too long!), they, too, will find success in the writing process.

Our enthusiasm for writing and modeling what it means to be a writer is essential in establishing an effective classroom climate for developing writers. This enthusiasm is made clear to students in the way we approach and talk about writing, and it contributes to the pleasant and supportive environment shown to positively influence student writing. Whether our writing gets published or not, we must live the life of a writer for our students' sake.

Challenge

This key idea of teachers as writers, though, isn't without its challenges. In the early 1990s, a debate erupted in *English Journal* about the notion when Karen Jost made the case that teachers don't have the time or energy to be writers. Her impassioned argument against a long-held belief drew vociferous support and dispute. Out of the many responses, several themes emerged—including what it means to be a writer, because how we define that has a lot to do with our belief about teachers being writers. I like Katie Wood Ray's response to both sides, acknowledging the need to write alongside the constraints of teaching:

> As teachers of writing, we don't need to write a lot or even very often. We can't; we're very busy. . . . We don't need to have these incredibly active writing lives to understand the process of writing as insiders, but we do need to have tried, at least once, to do the things we are asking our students to do. And we need these to be *quality* experiences, experiences we have examined deeply enough to know what they teach us about how writing happens. (*What* 7, emphasis in original)

What does this mean in real life? Like every other classroom teacher, I had too little time to do what I needed for class, let alone for my life outside of class,

so there was little time to write in the traditional sense of published writing. But I tried to write a little. I wrote notes and letters to my family, and, when I took a class, I wrote for the assignments. I wrote parts of what I assigned students to write (not always the whole assignment, but part of it so I would know what it felt like and what the hard parts might be). I wrote poems with my students and emails to their parents.

Once, I wrote an essay to be read to our school's parent council. Only two teachers were allowed to attend (I wasn't one of them), but some of the parents on the council were intimidating the faculty, showing up in classes and critiquing teachers' professional decisions. I wanted to express what I thought about the practice. I wrote my response—made seven drafts with input from other teachers—and had it read at the meeting. The parents left the meeting in tears (I probably shouldn't be proud of that, but I am) and stopped their intimidating behavior. I was a writer who could talk to my students about writing, even though I had not had anything published.

Our lives as writers provide a powerful example and help us serve as mentors for the writers in our classrooms. Whatever we write, if we reflect on the process, on how we felt during the writing and what challenges we had to overcome, we can find content to take into the classroom to help the writers there. Living as writers makes every action we take in our writing classrooms different—meaningful.

Another way we play a vital role in building a supportive classroom climate is through our enthusiasm about writing. Is writing a task we sometimes assign for punishment? Is it something we put off for other tasks? Do we approach writing tasks with reluctance or even dread? Students can read our actions; they can sense how we feel. Our enthusiasm is made visible in both the *unintentional* and the *intentional* ways we approach the classroom writing tasks, as well as in the way we help students see themselves as writers in communities.

Yes, communities. Even when we write by ourselves, writing occurs in communities. When I write, I might be alone with my computer, but I still talk to others about my work, bouncing ideas off them. I read research, involving people at a distance in my writing. I ask others to read what I write and give me feedback. And I have friends and family who allow me the time and space to do my writing and who celebrate with me on meeting my goals along the way. My community. And it is an important part of our role as writing teachers to establish a community for the writers in our classrooms.

Window into a Classroom

I have borrowed an idea from the *Moving Writers* blog (movingwriters.org) to have my students start our class with a *self-page*, following mentors from *Artists, Writers, Thinkers, Dreamers* (Hancock). Right away, we work in groups to see what we notice about the mentor texts, building a list of characteristics we identify and then individually creating a page we can share with others in the class, a page that shows how we are like others but also unique. The pages are placed on the walls of the room in the first week of school so that we have opportunities to revisit them, to remind ourselves of who we are as individuals and as a community. In this activity, we initiate practices that will occur repeatedly in our writing community: we have begun our use of mentor texts, worked in groups as writers preparing to write, and shared our writing and thinking. An extension to further community building might be to have students work with the self-pages in subsequent weeks to identify potential groups for other work in the class based on common themes or interests. Figures 1.1 and 1.2 offer examples.

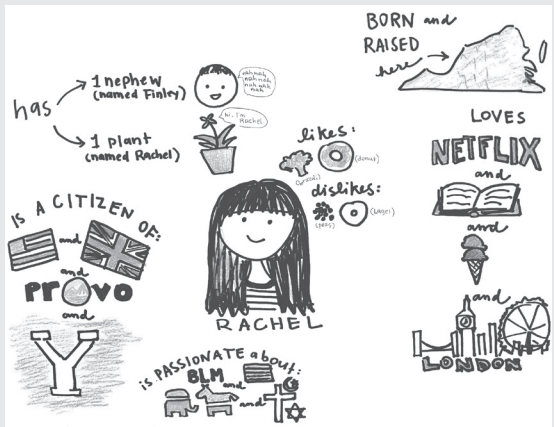


FIGURE 1.1. Self-page: Rachel.

FIGURE 1.2. Self-page: Kristen.

At the beginning of the year, teachers who want to establish a pleasant, supportive environment to nurture writers find ways to get to know their students, particularly as writers. Some teachers have students fill out surveys or questionnaires to gather information about the writers in their classes. Others begin the year with a writing unit that has a particular focus, such as a memoir study, to help students introduce themselves to the teacher and to the class as individuals and writers.

Most of the time, we think of community building as something that happens primarily at the beginning of the school year; in reality, community building begins there but requires time and attention all year long. Writer's notebooks and regular informal writing *and sharing* are one way we can help contribute to developing community throughout the year. At every grade level I have taught, my students consistently identify how sharing their daily writer's notebooks helps them feel part of a writing community. As they write together and share, they learn more about one another as both writers and people.

When I first participated in a Slice of Life event (see twowritingteachers.org/challenges), I was surprised at how quickly I felt that the writing, sharing, and commenting made me feel part of a community—of people I didn't even know! So now, in addition to our writer's notebooks, students in my classes also contribute regularly to our own Slice of Life (on our class wiki); it never fails to help students feel more like part of a community. In our work with writing, making sure every student is heard in the classroom in one way or another keeps the community developing all year long.

Window into a Classroom

Kelsey Corter sets up her class according to this principle: "When you look around, we hope you can see the kinds of learners that share this space. Each day, when children enter our classrooms, they see themselves, they see their passions, they see their learning." Students' work is on the walls of the classroom, but the walls also feature student drawings of possible topics for research, photos from home that remind them of personal stories, and collages of their interests. The displays on the walls ensure that, when students are absent from class, they are not forgotten—they have a space and face in the classroom. The classroom is a place where they know one another and they share their writing lives. We can post students' work—both polished and informal—on the walls of our classroom so that students feel represented there.

Challenge

Despite our best efforts, sometimes community building feels almost impossible. Kathi Yancey talks about the *delivered curriculum* and the *experienced curriculum*, noting that students' experiences in the classroom sometimes differ from what we intend because students bring past experiences into the classroom with them. Those past experiences color how students receive what we

do. Sometimes I can try all my best practices, all the tools and knowledge I have for community building, but the sense of a real community is still a challenge. Students may have had personal issues with other students in the class that are too deep to bridge in a writing class. One year, I had a high school class with racial tensions—skinheads in the same room as immigrants from Somalia—that was pretty challenging. In many ways, that group of students never became a community in the way I always hope for. I could keep behaviors appropriate, but we never could take the kinds of risks and share in the ways that truly build community. Still, we should do what we can to work toward creating a supportive community, to create the best possible situation available for the most students we can, but recognize that some issues students bring with them are a challenge to how close the overall community can be. We do the best we can within our specific contexts. Even when it's hard, we still try.

That said, even in communities, writers also function as individuals, choosing to write or not, choosing how to take up invitations to write and collaborate, and choosing whom to work with in the process. The enthusiasm and authenticity teachers who write bring to this individual aspect of the process becomes essential. If we are writers, we understand the challenges and how each individual writer deals differently with those challenges. Teachers who write understand the value of community, but we also understand the needs of individual writers within that community.

Research Toolbox

"Language, then, is not merely representational (though it is that), it is also constitutive. It actually creates realities and invites identities" (Johnston 9).

How we use language in the classroom matters, probably more than we expect in establishing reasonable expectations and encouraging independence. Through our language, we can show students that we believe in them, that their success matters to us, that their writing is improving, that their success can be attributed to their effort, that they can become independent and even better writers, and that we expect they can meet our high expectations. Consider the contrasting statements presented in Table 1.1.

Commenting research shows that, if we want writers to improve a skill, we should give them a critique, but, if we want them to improve commitment, we should give them a compliment. As much of our work with developing writers is meant to help them commit to the life of a writer, compliments should play a big part in our talk with students. Lanny Ball frames his compliments in a specific way in order to help writers move forward; first, noticing a specific aspect

TABLE 1.1. Classroom Communication Styles: Alternative Approaches

Look how well you did! You must be very smart!	This writing really helped me learn more about volcanos. I can tell how hard you worked to make this writing effective.
Okay. Time to put your reading away. We have to work on our writing now.	It's writing time! Let's get out our tools and see what we can learn about ourselves as writers today.
This is a really hard assignment, but it will get you ready for college writing.	You did such a good job developing your main idea in the photo essay, I know you'll be able to do even better on the analysis in this book review.
You need to do peer feedback to help your fellow students see what to fix.	Be sure to share insights about what it felt like to be a reader of your fellow student's writing so they know how a reader experiences it.
You don't look like you are staying on pace with your writing. Are you going to be finished by the due date?	I've noticed that writing in class doesn't seem to be an effective strategy for you on this writing task. What strategies do you think would work better for you?

of the writing; second, identifying why this aspect matters; and, third, encouraging future situations in which the author might use this aspect again. The talk we use as teachers can encourage independence and can help writers see that our expectations for them and their writing are achievable.

Window into a Classroom

In *Celebrating Writers*, Ruth Ayres describes working with a reluctant writer. Students were a few days into working on an informational writing task, but one student wasn't doing much. When she approached him, she asked how he was doing. At his shrug, she asked, "Do you want some help?" He said he needed time. Despite her inclination to make a suggestion, set a goal, she moved on. As she said, "Sometimes space, although difficult to give, is best." The next day, when she checked on what he was doing, he said, "Research." She followed up with another question: "What are you learning?" He had a response, and, at her silence when he paused, he continued, finally asking for advice on his direction. She asked if he needed help going forward. He didn't. Later, in the share session at the end of the workshop, she called on the boy, describing the next few minutes in this way:

> "Do you want to share what you learned through your research today?" He shrugged. I waited. Smiled. Waited. Nudged: "I see you have a list in your notebook." (Ayres and Overman 3)

The boy eventually explained that he had made a list, another student asked about it, and then said he should make a list, too. Ayres followed up by encouraging students to follow the boy's lead and write down a few things they might forget from that day's research if they hadn't already. Sometimes, as Ayres shows, the right thing is to let students find their way on the path, not for teachers to tell what to do. That kind of talk (or silence) values the student, encourages independence, and shows trust. All things that matter in a community of writers.

Window into a Classroom

Ruth Ayres also has some effective ways to praise students even when it doesn't seem like there is much to praise. And she follows the praise with a nudge—something I really like. Here are a few examples:

- For a student who stares into space: "You're a thinker, which is a great quality for a writer! Let's try to get some of your thoughts out of your brain. Would you like to make a sketch or talk to someone else about what you're writing next?"
- For a student who has supplies but hasn't started writing: "You have all of your supplies with you and are ready to go! Now it's time to get to work."
- For a student who is complaining: "You are very passionate about not wanting to write. Passionate people make the best writers. What are some other things you feel strongly about?" ("No More 'I Can't Write'")

Praise

In a supportive classroom, teachers praise student writers. But, if we want the praise to work in a way that moves writers forward, it needs to be specific—"Your words in describing the setting were so precise that I could really see the place"—and legitimate, not just praise for praise sake.

From these few examples, we can see that one way to use praise is to focus on the positive of whatever the writers' actions are and turn that praise to the next step, instead of focusing on negative behaviors.

All the praise in our classrooms doesn't have to come from us. We can teach students how to support the other writers in the classroom through appropriate praise—and that contributes to both the development of the community and the individual writers within the community. Graham et al. (*Teaching Secondary Students*) suggest two protocols to teach students how to give praise in a writing community, so that praise becomes part of the practices of the community:

1. "Praise, question, polish" asks peers to first praise something specific in the writing, then ask a question they have about the writing, and finally make a recommendation for something specific to polish.
2. "Glow and grow" feedback begins with a compliment and concludes with a suggestion to move the writing forward. (50)

Both protocols share the same concept: they begin with specific praise and end with a specific recommendation for improvement. These practices build writers and community in the writing classroom.

Celebration

Celebration, including self-rewarding, epitomizes the practices that build a supportive, pleasant classroom environment. Celebration includes praise and teacher enthusiasm, but it can go beyond that, too. It can also include independent writers setting goals for both product and process—and acknowledging the accomplishment of those goals in some way.

My own teacher journey to understanding the importance of celebration is, sadly, longer that it should have been, as I described at the beginning of this chapter. I learned to plan for celebration days on the due date of major projects. On that day, we shared our writing. We acknowledged what we had done, and we took some time to celebrate our achievements. I purchased several Scrabble games, and sometimes, after the sharing, we had a game day. I'd bring popcorn and Jolly Rancher candy (I know many schools don't allow food now) that made our day a little more special. Since then, I've learned to incorporate more celebration into my writing classes, not just at the end of writing: "We had an early draft due today! Yea! We can have a five-minute dance party." I've had students who didn't have a draft completed ask if they should participate in the celebration. I always say, "Yes": Have they done something? Have they moved somewhere along the path in their writing? If so, they should celebrate. Celebration can be very motivating.

After I had started my own journey to understanding the importance of celebration, I read a short blog post by Barbara Kerley in which she discussed her writing process. Her post begins: "I'm done. I'm done. Or in moments of giddiness, to paraphrase Pooh, dum-diddly-um-dum done. Only this time, I mean it." She then goes on to explain all the ways a writer can be *done* before they are really done (and I love her descriptions!):

- "huge-relief done" when you finish a draft
- "nod-in-satisfaction done" when you have your first critique group read the draft
- "holding-your-breath done" when the manuscript is turned in for feedback
- "sorta-almost-if-you-are-a-flexible-thinker done" when you get revision suggestions
- "fingers-crossed done" when you submit what you think is the last draft ("Done").

Kerley also advises that "it's important to acknowledge (and, whenever possible, celebrate and take strength from) each one of these 'dones.'" That's the key to celebrations, I think; they give writers the strength to go on. And I want that intentional movement and resilience—for myself and for my student writers.

I am getting better at teaching my students that writers celebrate achieving their goals. Now, when we make our personal writing goals, I also ask students to identify how they will reward themselves for achieving each goal—they need to write it down beside the goal they've written down. (I told myself that I could start the next season of my Netflix binge show when this chapter was finished!)

Research Toolbox

"The mission of writing workshop is to help people learn to be writers for life. Genuine celebration aids in this mission" (Ayres and Overman 10).

Celebration, however, doesn't always have to be a party. As Ayres notes, "noticing and naming the things a writer is doing and then sharing how we are affected as readers" is a kind of celebration (Ayres and Overman 13). Teachers can—and should—do that kind of noticing every day we write. After all, as writers, we all need that—and it contributes significantly to the supportive, pleasant environment students need to develop as effective writers.

Collaboration

Noted first in *Writing Next* (Graham and Perin) and in other reports since, collaboration is significant in helping writers build a supportive community for writing *and* become better writers, too. If we remember that all writing is collaborative, we can use the benefits of this important practice to help our students develop as writers. Some of the benefits include the following:

- helping writers learn how to work with others
- helping writers develop a better sense of audience
- helping writers see that writing is a social act
- helping writers take risks and see the outcomes of those risks.

Collaboration in writing could refer to coauthored pieces of writing, writing created by all the contributors participating in all aspects of that piece of writing. It could also refer to writing in which different authors contribute different aspects to the writing. Or it could refer to individual pieces of writing where writers get feedback from peers or others at different points of the writing

process. Even if we never confer with others in the process, writing is still collaborative because it occurs in a context, it responds to other pieces of writing, or it is informed by other writing in some way (either for content or as a genre). So teachers can use collaboration intentionally, in a variety of ways, to develop writers and the writing community in their classrooms.

Because collaboration has such a wide range of possible applications, there isn't one right way to use it. Instead, what we should consider are the outcomes we want from collaboration because the desired outcomes should determine the tasks we ask students to collaborate on and the decisions we make for grouping or for assessing. Although writing quality improves through effective collaboration, social interactions are a key part of collaboration and can also be a part of the desired outcomes. As goals vary between quality writing and developed social skills, classroom practices of collaborative writing also vary; from all practices, however, students benefit.

Challenge

Although collaboration has many benefits to writers—both for the social aspects and the writing aspect—making it work is something else. If you've tried it, you know that sometimes students need help learning how to work productively with others. Part of that problem could be a social one (have students learned how to interact in positive ways with others?), but part of it could also be related to writing. Do they know enough about the topic, genre, or processes to contribute positively to a discussion about writing? Sometimes it could even be lack of adequate direction. A lot of times, students falter because they don't know what to do in their collaboration. We can address many of these challenges with adequate preparation—preparation for both the students and the situation.

Collaboration, although often used primarily in later stages of the writing process (giving feedback), can and should be a part of the entire writing process for students in our classes. I have found that students often benefit most from collaborative input early in the writing stages. For example, after we have studied mentor texts, I ask students to brainstorm multiple possible topics and make a list. I prompt them to think broadly. For example, when writing is based on personal subjects, I ask them to make a list, to consider hobbies, places, groups they are part of, and so on, in order to add to their initial lists. Next, I ask them to star the two they are most interested in writing about, and then to get into small

Window into a Classroom

Liz Prather describes a practice in her classroom that uses collaboration early in the writing process: *writing pitches*. After the initial idea generation and inquiry, students compose and deliver writing pitches to their peers. Pitches include sharing the idea, where it came from, and why it matters to the writer. Pitches also include information about how the writer plans to get the writing done. After students present their pitches, peers ask questions and give suggestions; writers need approval from the class before proceeding.

groups. In those groups, they share their ideas and talk about why they like those ideas so other students can ask questions and indicate which topic might be the best for the writer or of most interest to others in the class who will be their audience. Sometimes the discussion raises more possibilities for the writers—also a benefit—but students see how collaboration even very early in the writing process can be helpful.

Collaboration can be part of the inquiry process as students develop content for writing, too. My own ninth graders appreciated a collaborative evidence-collecting activity we did prior to their writing about a character in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. In groups, students worked to develop attributes of each of the main characters in the novel. We drew outlines of the character on six-foot pieces of butcher paper; inside the outlines, students listed several traits, each one followed by evidence (quotes, examples, ideas) along with the corresponding page numbers from the book. As groups finished, they were encouraged to move to other characters (what we called "big people") to add traits or evidence that they didn't see on the paper. We hung these "big people" around the room, so that, when it came time to write, students could choose a character and had access to collaboratively collected evidence for any claims they wanted to make.

Window into a Classroom

Rebekah O'Dell describes a similar collaboration for information gathering before drafting: Writer's Telephone. After class discussions, students write their "best guess theory" about the big idea of the poem. As students sit in a circle, they pass each paper around, with each student noting one piece of evidence in the poem that supports the big idea written at the top of the page. As O'Dell notes, each student had "his or her own idea nurtured by the rest of the class, but each student also reported that the process helped them see details in the poem they hadn't seen before" ("Writer's Telephone"). Perfect outcome for collaboration.

The most common use of collaboration during the writing process occurs during the later stages of writing—prior to or during revision. What we call this practice matters:

- *peer editing*—the phrase suggests that students are doing the cleanup work of editing (checking spelling, grammar, etc.)
- *peer evaluation*—this phrase suggests students are providing qualitative responses, possibly even a grade
- *peer feedback*—this term might suggest less evaluation than peer evaluation, but it could be seen as vague, "I liked it" kind of responses

For the purposes of this chapter, I will use the term *peer feedback*, as I think it allows for a range of responses and avoids the narrow focus on correcting. Peer feedback encourages the development of community partly because students learn from one another and partly because of the critical thinking that is inherent in the feedback process.

Challenge

We also need to consider that students, despite their enjoyment in working together, often wonder about the value of the peer feedback. At least mine have expressed that feeling. Do their peers really know enough to give effective feedback? Sometimes they worry about the social consequences of commenting on a peer's writing, or they don't know how to articulate what they are seeing or feeling as they read their peer's writing. That said, students often tell me that, if they know their peers will be reading their writing, they tend to care more about the quality, even in classes with other opportunities for audiences beyond the classroom. Important to consider, especially when students aren't sure they get the best feedback, is that research shows that students who gave feedback actually benefited more than those who received it (Chanski and Ellis). So all students can gain from collaborating with fellow writers at this stage of the writing process.

Even with the challenges, the benefits seem to outweigh the drawbacks, and teachers can enhance the effectiveness of peer feedback through several tweaks:

- *Make sure to give enough time for the feedback process*. First, time needs to be allotted for training and learning to work together; we also need to consider that writers need time to talk—sometimes about topics beyond the writing—because of the social nature of this task. But we also need to provide time for discussion. If we don't provide enough time, students might focus only on the easy things, surface concerns; worse, they might think our rush suggests that they don't have substantive comments to make to one another.
- *Require students to read their writing aloud*. This can be noisy, but most of us hear our writing differently when we read it silently from the screen or page than when our ear actually hears someone voice the text. Students reading silently and then writing on the paper encourages a "teacher" role over a peer or audience one (Howard 60); reading aloud

encourages a more collaborative feeling, important for students to get the best benefit from peer feedback.

- If possible, *require students to work from a printed copy of their writing*. Various reports show that writers may have difficulty gaining a global perspective of their writing from the screen (DiPardo and Freedman 138).
- After students have read their writing aloud, *ask them to listen to comments from group members without responding to the comments or defending their choices*. This silence prevents students from explaining what they "meant to say." Instead, have them simply write down any comments peers make, reminding them that silence doesn't mean that they agree—just that they are willing to consider how someone else reacted to their writing.
- *Train students in how to talk to each other and how to talk about writing*. Help them notice both what is working and what is confusing—and how to talk about both productively. If students want to begin a comment with a positive, that's great. Encourage them, however, to follow an "I liked it" with a specific example about why or where.
- *Make sure that students know that commenting is not about cosmetics but substance*. Some of this understanding might come from the teaching—and modeling—teachers do ahead of having students provide feedback on peer writing.

Window into a Classroom

Rebekah O'Dell ("Encouraging Talk") provides generic suggestions that should get effective, substantive feedback, asking students to identify:

- lines or ideas they wish they had written or thought of
- sentences that don't make sense to them
- places they want to know more
- places where they start to drift away (I love this one!)

Some of students' understanding about substance versus surface might also come from the guides teachers use to help writers structure this peer feedback. Although there are differing viewpoints about the value of providing guides or not, I am not alone in considering that some guidance can be helpful—and I am certain that the shape and substance of those guides may contribute to the quality of the peer feedback. A lot. If guides prompt peers to look at surface issues or to correct, students will have doubts about the value of peer feedback reinforced. On the other hand, when guides prompt substantive feedback, writers are more likely to have a positive experience.

We should also consider how we encourage students to work collaboratively after the writing is published. Although it's often a discussion technique, a gallery walk is a good way for writers to share their writing and get responses from their community. Students are given sticky notes and asked to move around the

room and read the writing that has been placed where there is space for reading and writing notes. Before the gallery walk, the class might want to discuss how to make comments at this stage of writing as the purpose is to celebrate what is working and not to give feedback for revision. Students also need to be prepared to make specific comments on writing; knowing the characteristics of the genre facilitates this as students can direct comments to the features they have learned for the genre. At the end of the gallery walk, students can collect their comments and then share which ones they will use for their next writing: when something works well, we want to keep doing it!

Finally, we might want to consider when (and how!) we ask students to write or work collaboratively in the traditional sense—multiple writers on one writing task. Having a clear purpose for the collaboration matters, particularly a task that benefits from collaboration. And structure matters, too. Simply putting students into groups doesn't take advantage of the benefits of the practice. We can also consider how we might build skills for bigger collaborative projects by giving students smaller yet effectively planned collaborative tasks first. McCann provides several pieces of advice for teachers so they can structure collaborative activities more successfully (123). I've listed these and then elaborated on them in Table 1.2.

Technology can enhance collaboration either through interactive platforms like Flipgrid (flipgrid.com), which allow for distant collaboration, or wikis or Google Docs, which provide a great space for writers to work collaboratively at many levels: students can work together to submit pieces that others can comment on or they can submit different parts to the same task (a study guide or a reference guide, for example). Although technology might alter the way writers interact, teachers can still help students understand how to navigate the different social interactions, and how positive behaviors still matter in these online collaborations.

Challenge

One challenge to making collaboration work might have to do with the teacher's experience of writing collaboratively. Gere notes that teachers are usually better at incorporating collaboration effectively in their classrooms when they have experienced it themselves. Bishop found that to be true in her personal experience too, explaining that she had tried collaborative writing occasionally in her classroom but didn't get the results she wanted until she coauthored some poetry. After that, she felt that she could see beneath the outward structures of collaborative practice to the ways it needed to function in order to be of value. My own experience suggests the same thing: from my own collaborative writing

experiences (some better than others), I can anticipate what might make collaboration more or less effective for my students. Teachers might try to write some documents collaboratively to develop their own perspectives about this process and help them understand students' concerns in the experience.

Another consideration of collaboration is that it shifts the power structures in the classroom. Collaboration gives some authority over to students for the goals and outcomes of the work together. Instead of the teacher being the expert, the sole source of knowledge in the classroom, or the person who manages the work processes, peers now take some of that role. When students work in groups, they may raise more questions—unexpected ones—that can change the direction of learning. Collaboration can mean fewer answers or unsettled conclusions. Students may work at different paces than a teacher would have them work. Teachers need to anticipate these shifts and be prepared for the challenges of students providing feedback.

TABLE 1.2. Structuring Collaborative Activities

Advice	Elaboration
Plan for grouping of students	We will need to consider if students should be grouped with others of similar abilities and interests, with friends, even with students of the same or different gender. Each kind of grouping has benefits and challenges, so carefully considering the desired outcomes might help teachers choose which grouping would be most effective for each collaborative activity.
Plan for physical spaces	When some classes are overcrowded with desks so that movement is difficult, collaboration suffers. Groups need to be able to see each other—face to face—and to be able to work without interruption from other groups. Teachers need to consider how the space can be most effectively designed to allow for these important aspects of effective collaboration. Sometimes it might mean moving outside the classroom.
Set specific expectations	Just putting students into groups without any clear expectations for the work of the group often leads to problems (at worst) and ineffective outcomes (at best). *Before getting into groups*, students should know what the intended outcome for the group is and what time frame they have for the work. They might need to have assigned roles, if the task requires different kinds of work to be done.
Choose a meaningful task	Sometimes students are familiar with being put into groups to do tasks that they could just as easily do by themselves, and, if the desired outcome is related to social interactions, that might be okay. But it should be clear to students that the goal of the interaction is something to do with *how* they interact more than what they produce. On the other hand, the best collaborative tasks are ones that require the work of more than one person so that students are able to see the benefit of collaboration at the same time as they engage in positive social interactions. The best tasks for collaboration are those that are (a) labor intensive, so that members of the group can each take separate subtasks essential to the overall product; (b) specialization tasks that require multiple areas of expertise that can be provided by different members of the group; and (c) synthesis tasks that require multiple perspectives to come together to create a solution (Ede and Lunsford).
Monitor group functioning	Once students are in groups, we need to monitor the groups and ensure that the groups are accomplishing their tasks. More important, teachers who monitor are particularly adept at noticing if the social interactions are working or not and can offer suggestions for helping to improve them on the spot before they become truly problematic.

Note: Adapted from McCann.

Several years ago, I was conferencing with a student who had not met the objectives of the writing assignment I had given. I had not only assigned but also taught the process, shown mentor texts, and defined the expectations for the writing: a reversal of a commonly held view on a topic that the student writer knew a lot about but had also researched. This student had written a radio play about aliens, and I wanted him to rewrite the assignment. It wasn't the form of the writing that was the problem; the student had written a very entertaining play instead of an informative piece, which was the objective we were working on for the task: inquiry and informative writing. As we talked, he kept repeating, "But my peers liked my story." Even though they each wrote their own essays, students had collaborated at several points during the writing process. I asked the student about some of these conversations and looked at comments they had written on earlier drafts. It turns out that they had somewhat encouraged him to pursue this topic and format—either because they, too, didn't understand the objective of the writing or because they didn't know what else to say. All his original topic choices had been unsuitable for development in this kind of writing, and, when he had completely written a very entertaining radio play, what were they to say? "This isn't the kind of thing we were supposed to write"? "Start over"? As teachers, we have to recognize that having students collaborate has several benefits, but it can also, in turning over some authority to students, create some interesting challenges. Closer monitoring on my part might have helped the situation.

"Closing Thoughts," a passage in Ayres's book *Celebrating Writers*, moves me every time I read it—I have copied it on card stock so that I can see and read it often. It epitomizes, for me, this aspect of effective writing instruction—the importance of what the teacher brings to the classroom to create the kind of culture that makes writing instruction work, that helps students see themselves as writers and as part of a community of writers. I hope it moves you the same way it does me—and reminds us all of the importance of what we do (and what we can do) in that square room filled with desks and people and pencils and paper. We can bring joy to the room and to the culture of writing.

> There are many things we cannot control. We cannot control educational mandates. We cannot

Window into a Classroom

Fred Hamel describes several specific ways that one teacher implemented collaboration in his classroom. First, students kept a "blue sheet" (named for the color of the paper) that guided them through the writing process; the back of the sheet provided space for comments they received from their community through that process so that they could keep track of how their community helped them in their writing. The teacher had an "idea station" (21) where students could meet if they wanted help generating ideas. Students requested feedback about their writing from at least two peers and one adult during the process. Each day, students shared publicly some of the writing that occurred that day. In these various ways, the teacher used collaboration to develop writers and to contribute to the sense of a classroom community—a supportive writing environment.

control fathers drinking and mothers leaving. We cannot control standardized writing assessments.

But we can choose joy.

. . . We choose joy about the excess periods in a student's writing, because a month ago there were none. We choose joy about the three meager lines of writing, because yesterday there were crushed pencil points and tears. We choose joy about the misspellings, because all of the sight words are accurate.

. . . There will always be an error, a refusal, an inadequate paragraph. Student writing will never be perfect. We live among the mess. We can choose to wallow in the doom. Or we can choose joy.

I will always choose joy. I suspect you will too. (87–88)

"What works?"

As teachers, it's a question we often ask ourselves about teaching writing, and it often summarizes other, more specific questions we have:

- What contributes to an effective climate for writing?
- What practices and structures best support effective writing instruction in grades 7–12?
- What classroom content helps writers develop?
- What tasks are most beneficial for writers learning to write?
- What choices should I make as a teacher to best help my students?

Using teacher-friendly language and classroom examples, Deborah Dean helps answer these questions; she looks closely at instructional practices supported by a broad range of research and weaves them together into accessible recommendations that can inspire teachers to find what works for their own classrooms and students.

Based in part on the Carnegie Institute's influential *Writing Next* report, this second edition of *What Works in Writing Instruction* looks at more types of research that have been conducted in the decade since the publication of that first research report. The new research rounds out its list of recommended practices and is designed to help teachers apply the findings to their unique classroom environments. We all must find the right mix of practices and tasks for our own students, and this book, through windows into individual classrooms and explorations of challenges to effective pedagogy, offers the best of what is currently known about effective writing instruction to help teachers help students develop as writers.

At Brigham Young University, **Deborah Dean** teaches future teachers about writing instruction, and she directs a site of the National Writing Project, working with practicing teachers.

NCTE
National Council of Teachers of English
www.ncte.org

ISBN 9780814156810
90000 >
9 780814 156810