

A Window Pane on Dwindle Pain Or Rediscovering Publishing Centers in the Elementary School

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In Connecticut public schools, publishing centers seemed to be growing in popularity during the late eighties and early nineties of the twentieth century. Today, few schools continue to have them, and I was able to find very little recently published scholarly literature on school publishing centers. Their popularity seems to have dwindled, and I'm left wondering why. Are students and teachers left to suffer the resultant "dwindle-pain?" Is it "dwindle-pain" when our eyes glaze over from reading too many predictable student essays that are written prescriptively for rubrics instead of self expression?

"Don't bother to write if you're not going to publish," seem like harsh words for anyone, much less a child. Admittedly, I balked when I first heard them. They sliced through my sensitivities as a teacher and as a writer, yet like the proverbial pebble in a shoe, I couldn't shake them from my memory. Though I've forgotten its source, this dictum seems to hold a profound underlying truth that I'm just beginning to uncover. Now, I daresay, I use these same words with complete conviction when I address my writing students.

Why do we write? I venture to say that we write to communicate. Since the earliest cuneiform script was etched into clay tablets, it can be surmised that this was the purpose of the written word. Written communication is meant to be more lasting than the spoken word, and it requires a reader in order to complete the exchange of information.

I consider myself a writer, primarily because I've habitually journaled for the past thirty years. I write for myself (*woe to the person who reads my diary*), and the practice helps me to sort out thoughts and emotions, document experience, plan, and create. Though I do not intend to stop journaling, I can see that my entries have an unfinished, almost dreamlike quality. Rarely, do I re-read my diaries, and I can assume that no one will ever read them. Thus, my creative writing comes in fits and spurts and gets buried, unrevised and unedited, in the pages of journals on the bookshelf. It will never be read, and so never communicated.

I'm comfortable writing reports and proposals for a real audience as part of my profession. I'm not in the habit of sharing my creative writing with a reader. Last summer, I participated in the Connecticut Writing Project, a summer institute designed to promote teachers as writers. There, I discovered a new level of artistic satisfaction from putting pen to paper.

During the CWP experience, I became passionate about my creative writing. Late nights and early mornings would find me at my keyboard, sometimes giggling aloud as I coaxed new ideas from my imagination. Why

was I enthralled with creative writing more so than ever before? I believe the difference maker was that I was now connecting to a reader. I was now publishing.

Connecticut Writing Project participants publish weekly and receive feedback from total strangers as well as response groups and fellow teachers in the institute. Our creative writing is shared with a real audience via a closed national internet network. Writers can read the comments and resubmit revised and edited editions repeatedly, until the written piece accurately reflects what the writer wants to say.

This publishing process revealed to me a new dimension of my craft. I found that when I write creatively for a real audience the words take on a life of their own, and I become more interested in shaping and refining them as a watchful mother might nudge her toddler toward walking. The process becomes a joyous birthing experience that's not complete until witnessed by a reader. This personal epiphany led me to wonder how I might bring that joy to my writing students.

"It is terribly important for kids to read and write for the reasons that people the world over read and write, which is to communicate, to be delighted, to laugh." -Lucy Caulkins

Publishing student work for a real audience has been considered a crucial part of the writing process commonly taught in elementary schools. It's often seen as the final step and can easily be overlooked or omitted, yet I contend that publishing is the single most important stage.

Publication is the Crucial Final Step that Drives the Entire Writing Process.

In the early eighties there was a movement to bring "process writing" to instructional practices in schools. This is the practice of breaking down the craft into six stages: prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, final drafting, and publishing. In the eighties and nineties, it was the preferred teaching strategy toward writing and each stage was developed in itself and as part of the process.

Today, the drafting stage is emphasized, and it is the ability to write drafts that is tested on standardized exams. Revising and editing are also tested, but in isolation from the student's draft. Students seem to be getting the message that these are skills unrelated to their writing, or at least an after-thought. When publishing is emphasized, revising and editing become an integral and satisfying part of the writing process.

The publishing stage includes numerous possibilities for selecting a reader for a final draft. This includes simple notes, letters, class newsletters, and newspapers and extends to having student work published in established journals. In the early years, there was a great deal of celebration connected with every stage of the writing process, and indeed there seemed to be a joyousness in the writing classroom. The publishing stage was

perhaps celebrated most joyously.

Over the past two decades, student writing is increasingly graded according to a rubric whereby points are earned through conformity. Little credence is given to original thought, the child's voice, or new ideas. There is an increased emphasis on teaching students to score high on standardized tests and prescriptive writing techniques are directly taught to students. Grades are based on how well the writer conforms to the rubric with little or no consideration for voice, creativity or originality. Writing is evaluated more and celebrated less.

Are Students Losing Their Joyfulness in Writing?

I teach enrichment students in an elementary school. They have the skills to write beautiful prose and poetry, yet many of them balk when I begin a writing unit. One might think that a child under ten, who has the skills to read and glean ideas from admired authors and the vocabulary and grammatical skills to write their own thoughts, would be ecstatic about writing! In truth, the opposite is usually the case. I find myself wondering why so many are reluctant to write.

Why Do Students Write?

I complete this exercise with my students yearly. We make brainstormed lists of all the ways we write from texting with friends, to business letters, to storytelling. It has been my experience that the majority of students are more comfortable writing non-fiction than they are with writing prose or poetry. They are usually more confident in reporting events than they are in sharing their thoughts.

"If children are to write, they should be encouraged to write about topics that are significant to them. This gives children the concept that the real purpose of writing is to communicate one's ideas and feelings to others."

-Lilian Gold

Do They Know Why They Write?

When asked, students usually admit they write when a parent or teacher gives them an assignment --e.g., "Write a thank-you to Aunt Donna," or, "Write a letter to your pen-pal in our sister school." Rarely, does a student report that he or she elects to write to sort out thoughts, express emotions, or simply to amuse oneself creatively. They tend to avoid re-reading, revising, and editing their work and would prefer to simply "hand it in" as quickly as possible. These students are "drafting," rather than writing. They are completing an early stage of the process and avoiding the later stages. This avoidance is lessened, and even transformed, when the publishing stage is emphasized in the process.

Rediscovering the Publishing Center

Educational theorists generally agree that if children enjoy writing

their skills will eventually improve. In our rural k-4 elementary school, a self-formed committee of four teachers decided to address the need for student publication with a school initiative. We chose to resurrect the practice of running a school publishing center to create books from student writing. The center would be available to all students in all grades and would accept manuscripts written on any topic at any time. A school publishing center would provide every student the opportunity to share in the joy of crafting words to accurately communicate their thoughts to a real audience.

Drawing on the experience of our literacy coach, we formulated a plan for opening the center in January 2009. She had established a publishing center in a school where she formally worked, and she generously shared tips, strategies, and templates to get us going. She also agreed to train the parent volunteers who would run the operation.

Volunteers would be instructed on how to participate at varying levels. Some who were unable to visit during school hours would type at home. They'd receive templates of several styles e-mailed to them as attachments and they'd use these to type and print the student manuscripts. Other parents and grandparents who were able to come to the center would bind manuscripts; then, they would deliver them to the students in their classrooms. Two parents would co-chair the parent volunteer committee and oversee the typing and delivery of the student books. They would keep a list of student authors and titles on a spreadsheet and see that typing responsibilities were evenly distributed among the volunteers. All parent volunteers needed to attend one of two scheduled training sessions.

Two of our committee members were CWP alumna, and we received a mini-grant to help us get the center running. In October we created a timeline to help us reach our goal to open the center by mid-January. Tasks to be completed included writing the mini-grant proposal, notifying teachers and parents, purchasing and organizing materials, locating a space for the publishing center, and planning a "grand opening" to draw the students' attention to this new addition to our school. The mini-grant proposal hinged on planning the "grand opening," so that became a priority.

Three committee members had the privilege of being students in Iris Van Rynbach's class on writing children's literature, held at Manchester Community College. We all agreed that she was not only a prolific writer, but she also had a wealth of knowledge about writing and publishing children's books. She was happy to share her thirty plus years of experience as a published author. And she selflessly spent hours reviewing her adult students' manuscripts, helping to shape them toward publication. We were confident that she would be as inspirational to our students, and we invited her to "kick-off" the grand opening of our school's publishing center.

Letters to parents and teachers, and student-made posters heralded the opening of our school's publishing center. Guest children's book author and illustrator Iris Van Rynbach kicked off the opening with a series of workshops in which she shared her work and inspired students to write their own. Students delighted in seeing her display of familiar and unfamiliar

children's books she wrote and illustrated. They marveled at her illustration skills as she sketched familiar book characters on poster paper. Student requests and suggestions helped to create the illustrations.

Later, third and fourth graders participated in a writers workshop, led by the author. They received tips and suggestions for their writing from Mrs. Van Rynbach. Working in this way with a professional in the field made them seem like "writers" in their own eyes. Several students used the writing exercises from that day in the books they went on to write.

Within a week, the publishing center produced the first student book, a non-fiction piece written by a fourth grader. It described how to own and care for a horse, and it contained photos and student illustrations throughout. The next day, a third grader arrived with his first of three books that were "spin-offs" of the *Star Wars* series. With emphasis on writing for rubric assessments, there's little time in the school day for this kind of student writing. The young author was giddy with joy that he could get teacher recognition for his extra-curricular writing. He became a regular visitor to the publishing center as he continued the theme with two more sequels for *Star Wars*.

Student manuscripts began pouring in, and in four months over a hundred books were published by various student authors. These were created both in school and at home, and for the most part, they were not assigned writing. Several students were repeat authors. There was little reward for publishing other than recognition in the classroom and applause from the student body during monthly assembly announcements. Those who published were proud of their accomplishments, and many others took the time to tell me of their intentions to publish. I'm wondering if the rewards aren't as "intrinsic" for them as they had been for me last summer. Indeed, there was joyfulness about these authors as they proudly shared their books with their teachers and their peers.

The reception of the publishing center was successful in our school. Parent volunteers seemed to enjoy participating in their child's schooling in a meaningful way, and teachers used the publishing center as another outlet for students' creative writing. The children loved getting their books published, and several came back with another book to publish or to share their plans for future publishing. There was a new, almost audible buzz of "excitement over writing" beginning to happen in our school. By most accounts, the center seemed to be a big success, and I was happy to overhear a first grade teacher in our school exclaim, "I don't know what I'd do without the publishing center!"

I daresay that many students feel the same way. By re-contextualizing the revision and editing process we found that students became proud of the editing marks on their manuscript. They were motivated, and even eager, to work on perfecting their piece. As I reviewed the 149 student titles at the end of the school year, it became evident that these writers are using their craft to deepen their understanding of themselves and the world around them. In publishing, they're communicating these understandings to a real audience.

Their originality is revealed in their book titles, some of which I include below:

- I Have a New Brother
 - The Swimming Pool
 - The Trophy Quest
 - Boo Hoo
 - Learning to Ride
 - The Broken Leg
 - The Snow Monster
 - I Marched in a Parade
 - I Grow Flowers
 - King Pizza and the Knights of the Kitchen Table
 - Dad Saves the Day
 - Bloody Noses
 - Exploring in the Forest
 - Amanda Left and I Cried
 - Hurting Ears
 - A Life with a Horse
- Orphans

aren Wasson writes that Children have an innate desire to communicate. They want to be successful as readers and writers. Our responsibility is to help them achieve the successes they desire. Children should feel they are writing for real purposes rather than for artificial purposes such as teacher-given assignments. The 149 student-written books in a school of 250 children over a period of four months has shown us that our children really do love to write.

What's next? The committee that formed the publishing center plans to meet before the next school year begins and make adjustments so that the center may grow and develop along with our writers. Some questions we might address are:
How might we bring the publishing center further along in this digital age by expanding our use of computer technology?

How can we broaden the readership of student-written books?

How might the publishing center encourage student writing over vacations?

Would an "author's tea" twice a year prove beneficial?

Can we set up a display of student-authored books in the school library? The public library?

Should the publishing center host "Writers Workshops," to further build student interest?

How might we conduct surveys with students, teachers, and parents to determine benefits of the publishing center and areas for improvement?

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