

2010 NCTE Donald H. Graves Writing Award
by Julie Johnson

Most people don't see themselves as writers, let alone researchers. They would say that they've never written a great novel or published in a scholarly journal. However, I beg to differ. You see, I am privileged to work with a group of 6 and 7 year-olds who each see themselves not only as authors, but also as scholars who do serious research. I was fortunate enough to host a researcher in my classroom this year, which brought us many opportunities. The best part was that the students became researchers right alongside our guest. They learned that researchers are writers who think, ask questions, and notice the world around them. We also know that they have conversations with other writers, making purposeful decisions in both their illustrations and word choice in order to help their readers understand; they also revise their work and publish it in many different ways, using technology as well as more traditional methods.

I invite you to step into Room 14 to watch our writer's workshop. As you enter, please be careful as you negotiate your way around a group of excited 6 year-old researchers spreading out 10 rulers to demonstrate the dimensions of a swan's wingspan. In another corner, notice the three boys are sprawled on the floor searching through snake books to find answers to their questions. Other students sit at round tables with a variety of paper spread out on the table using markers, colored pencils, and crayons to illustrate their writing. They are making intentional decisions about how to best represent their work. And, no, it isn't quiet in here. Conversation abounds! Talk is so important to all young writers, but especially to my students for whom English is a new language. It gives them the opportunity to rehearse their writing (be it expository text or prose) orally before they even put pencil to paper. I stand in the classroom surrounded by 24 eager learners who are always thinking and are confident that their ideas are valued and respected.

So, how did we get from drawing simple pictures with a few words underneath, to creating sophisticated literary non-fiction books with detailed illustrations? How did we move from students writing "I love my mom" to students making purposeful decisions about their poetry, narratives, informational books, letters—whatever they deem important? We got there because I believe that all students can be successful and my room is one where students can experiment, make mistakes, learn from others, and grow as writers. We got there because of my fundamental beliefs about the teaching of writing.

***Writers need time.** Writers need time to write for authentic purposes and audiences. They need time to read and listen to good, quality literature. They need time to practice what they are learning and they need materials to create many different genres of writing. Writers need time to process how different text structures work, including narrative and expository, and with the help of the teacher capture that in charts to refer to later. You will hear students reading their work to each other or meeting in small groups to talk about topic choice. If you walk into my room, you will know that important work is happening.

***We are a community of writers who enjoy writing.** Students have choice in what they write because they learn that writers write about what is important to them. The passion writers bring to their writing means that their words have an impact on others. In the beginning of the year, students bring in artifacts that will help us get to know them. I take a digital photograph of the objects which I print and put in their writing folders. These pictures support my young writers in choosing topics when they sit down to write. One object can hold a myriad of memories that become the subject of some wonderful stories or interesting informational writing. It is important to me that I create a trusting environment where students can take risks and grow as writers.

***Each writer is unique in their needs and interests.** It is my job to lift these young writers to be the best they can be. Each of my students comes to me at different levels, with different interests, and unique ideas. Through conferences, conversations, and observations, I am able to assess my students' needs and differentiate my instruction so that all will be successful. My students are encouraged to pursue their interests as they make choices in their writing, both when choosing a topic and publishing their work. They always have access to choices in paper, and writing and illustrating materials.

***My students are immersed in quality literature that includes both fiction and informational texts.**

When you step into my room you can't help but notice that reading and writing are intertwined. My classroom library is filled with mentor texts that the children turn to independently. Exemplars of quality writing in different genres by authors like Cynthia Rylant, Mo Willems, Steve Jenkins, Nicola Davies, and Time for Kids Early Readers are regarded as old friends by my students. We have conversations about the difference between expository texts and literary nonfiction (also known as hybrid informational text). It is not uncommon to hear a child say, "Hey, I'm going to make a book about all the different things pond animals eat like Steve Jenkins does in Move." (Move is about the different ways animals move). Or you might notice students discussing why they chose to use a diagram instead of a comparison on their "I Wonder" poster. As a writing teacher I have come to appreciate the quality of children's literature available to young writers today. Children's authors, recognizing the increasing sophistication of children as readers and writers, are producing exceptional pieces of writing that are worthy mentors for young authors. My students, reading such books with a critical eye, notice what authors do and how they make decisions for their own writing.

*** Writing is meaningful in all areas of the curriculum.** After reading Nell Duke's research about the scarcity of informational texts in first grade (Duke, N.K. 2000. 3.6 minutes per day: The scarcity of informational texts in first grade." *Reading Research Quarterly*, 35(2), 202–224) and after having conversations with the doctoral student doing research in my classroom, I began to question the current thinking that young children should focus only on personal narratives in writing workshop (Tower, C. 2002. "It's a snake you guys!": The power of text characteristics on children's responses to information books. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 37, 55-88). Moreover, I also knew that many of my English Language Learners didn't have the vocabulary to tell their stories in English. Focusing on informational texts was a natural extension to vocabulary development that we were already doing in the content areas. In addition, so much information can be gleaned through diagrams and illustrations which help emergent readers be successful researchers. Hence, I began early in the year to weave informational writing into writing workshop. I wanted to help my students begin to approximate the research skills they would need to use when they were much older. We began by collecting "I wonder..." questions at the same time learning about the text features of expository texts. Students then moved to finding answers to their questions and keeping track of their thinking in Discovery Journals. These young researchers published their work in a variety of ways...posters, hybrid informational books, podcasts, and videos featuring interviews of family members. Throughout this process, they made decisions about text structure and expository text features that would best help their readers understand their information. At other times, my students write thank you letters to Miss Billie for the much needed glue sticks. Or they write about their thinking after reading a story in Reading Workshop. And they continue to research as they write their observations about the tadpoles or mealworms in our classroom.

***It is important to regularly assess student writers.** I talk to students about their writing as they plan, draft, revise, share, and publish their work. After conferencing with students, I may decide to do a minilesson on how researchers can use sketches to show their learning, or how they might make notes at the top of their paper to remember some details they want to add to help the reader get a picture in his mind, or how authors go back and get their writing ready for publishing. I respond to student writing in individual conferences, small guided writing groups, and whole group mini-lessons. I think it's important to note that I am not the only teacher. The students also teach as they give each other feedback during peer conferences or share time.

***Technology is important to the writing process.** This year I challenged myself to incorporate more 21st century literacies in my instruction. Our world is changing and I believe that giving my students opportunities to use technology gives them a firm foundation on which to build the skills they'll need for the future. According to NCTE's policy brief statement, "Effective instruction in 21st-century literacies takes an integrated approach, helping students understand how to access, evaluate, synthesize, and contribute to information." My students used Pixie to illustrate their writing and record their voices. They also learned how to use iMovie with the help of our technology teacher and a lot of parent volunteers to digitally publish their personal narratives. Based on this individual work, I then created podcasts that the students and parents could view both at school and at home. My students also took

mini-camcorders and iPod Nanos home to interview their parents or grandparents for our oral history project. It was wonderful to see the students take on the role of a researcher; likewise it was amazing to see the respect that was given to them by their parents and grandparents as they took part in the interview. Technology afforded my students one more way to express their knowledge that was engaging as well as purposeful. Throughout the year I used my blog (www.raisingreadersandwriters.com) to reflect on this use of technology in my classroom.

***We celebrate our work.** Authors are honored in Room 14. We celebrate in small ways and we celebrate in big ways. Writing Workshop always ends in sharing. I may ask a student to share a “gem” in his writing. Another student might share something he tried based on our mini-lesson. Sitting in the author’s chair is a coveted position. But it doesn’t end there. We meet regularly with our kindergarten friends to share the books we write and listen to the books they wrote. Parents are invited to school several times to celebrate their child’s accomplishments as writers. At our pond museum, parents and guests mingled among the authors as they read their informational books (Slimy Snails, Fluttering Butterflies, Go Turtles, to name a few). Students proudly talked about the intentional decisions they made as they showed their 3 page spreads, or the camouflage colors used for the snake so that it would blend in with its surroundings. Our final celebration was one that honored not only my students, but their families as well. Parents, grandparents, brothers, and sisters gathered during the last week of school to watch the DVD of our family oral history project. This beautiful DVD is a compilation of each child’s illustration of the story being told (using textured papers and collage in the manner of Eric Carle and Steve Jenkins), their voice recording that introduces the story, and the video clip of a grandparent or parent telling a story from the family’s past. It was an extraordinary end to a year of learning about how powerful words are.

The year has drawn to a close now. Have I planted the seeds to nurture life-long writers? I can only step back now and be amazed. The writers I am sending forward are confident that their words make a difference. Not only that, but they are beginning to understand at this young age what it means to be a researcher. They know without a doubt that they are authors!