

Workshop 1

Creating a Community of Writers

Overview

After a short introduction to *Write in the Middle's* overall goals, Workshop 1 turns to a fundamental question: How can teachers create an environment that encourages and supports young writers?

Through interviews, teacher discussions, and classroom illustrations, Workshop 1 explores strategies that will help teachers create a safe and productive community of writers in their classrooms. The video features extended classroom segments from two teachers—Velvet McReynolds and Jack Wilde—along with brief vignettes from the classrooms of Vivian Johnson and Mary Cathryn Ricker and excerpts from an interview with Linda Rief, author of *Seeking Diversity: Language Arts With Adolescents*.

The community-building strategies discussed and demonstrated in Workshop 1 include establishing classroom routines and rituals, arranging the classroom to facilitate writing and discussion, read-alouds, teacher as writer, and providing opportunities for students to share and respond to writing.

“Creating a Community of Writers” closes with an exploration of some of the psychological and emotional needs specific to young adolescents and their learning. After National Middle School Association Executive Director Sue Swaim offers insight into the unique changes middle school students are undergoing, three teachers discuss how these developmental issues affect their instructional choices.

Workshop 1 Teachers

The teachers seen in the video program include:

- Gloria Hamilton, Grade 8, Crozier Middle School, Inglewood, California
- Vivian Johnson, Grade 8, T.A. Dugger Junior High School, Elizabethton, Tennessee
- Velvet McReynolds, Grade 7, Simmons Middle School, Hoover, Alabama
- Damond Moodie, Grade 8, Roosevelt Middle School, Oakland, California
- Mary Cathryn Ricker, Grade 7, Cleveland Quality Middle School, St. Paul, Minnesota
- Allen Teng, Grade 7, Will Rogers Middle School, Lawndale, California
- Jack Wilde, Grade 5, Bernice A. Ray School, Hanover, New Hampshire

Background Reading

Before coming to the workshop session, you should prepare to participate by:

- Surveying the Web site (www.learner.org/channel/workshops/middlewriting/) to familiarize yourself with what is available for all the workshop sessions in *Write in the Middle* and to review the specific materials for Workshop 1.
- Reading at least two of the four articles provided under “Related Reading” on the Workshop 1 Web page and highlighting two or three sections that strike you as particularly useful or insightful, that raise questions in your mind, or that relate to your own practice. Record your responses to the articles in your workshop journal.
- Reviewing the “Key Practices To Observe in Workshop 1,” available on the next page and on the Web site.

Key Practices To Observe in Workshop 1

In this workshop, you will see a number of effective practices for creating a community of writers. They include the following:

- Teachers recognize that middle school students are experiencing many changes. During this emotional time, they are trying to make sense of themselves, other people, and the world around them. They need to experience their own voices and to have an opportunity to think and communicate about the views of others. Participation in a community of writers will help these students not merely as writers and readers but as people.
- Providing students an opportunity to write for meaningful purposes and to share their work with their peers is an important way to create a community of writers. The experience of expressing something that matters to them in writing and then being able to share their ideas and feelings with classmates is especially helpful for young adolescents.
- When students write and when they talk with others, they are expected to offer their own ideas. Promoting student ownership does not isolate individuals; rather, it fosters a sense of occupying a responsible position in the community of writers. For students to consider themselves members of a community and gain from this experience, they must feel that they have a place, a position, an identity, a voice. They also must feel that they are contributing members of the group.
- Teachers write with students, provide students copies of their own works in progress, and display their writing by overhead projector. They talk about the challenges they face as writers. They convey their satisfaction in expressing themselves. After reading their work, teachers listen carefully to students' responses. They make notes on their drafts and talk about their plans. Not only does this modeling help students learn more about the craft of writing, but it also helps students feel less threatened sharing their own writing.
- The physical environment of the classroom contributes to a sense of community. Desks are arranged so that students face each other and can easily talk about their work and so that the teacher can easily sit or kneel beside the students in a non-dominating position. The room contains books, posted examples of students' work, quotes about writing, resources for writers, and other artifacts of a literate environment. An overhead projector and screen enable the teacher and students to share and discuss their work. One teacher includes a large rug in her classroom, a risk-free meeting ground for writers to read their work aloud and applaud their classmates' accomplishments.
- Teachers establish orderly, meaningful routines that give students a place in the community and foster their growth as writers. Core parts of the routine include writing, sharing writing, and talking about writing in a non-threatening atmosphere. The routine establishes that the students' feelings and ideas are important. This experience is especially important for young adolescents and for students who are new to the language and culture.
- Teachers organize so that students regularly gain response to their writing and provide response to classmates. Teachers also model respect in conversations about their own writing, as well as in conversations about the writing of students. Students are not just asked to respond, they are taught how to respond effectively. Diversity in opinions and backgrounds is acknowledged and embraced. Students realize that response does not have to be threatening, that members of the community are helped and protected.
- Through reading, especially reading aloud, teachers promote a sense of community. Community develops as the teacher and students recognize the meaning and value of the shared text and study the author's writing techniques. Reading aloud also provides a group experience with literacy that draws the class together and demonstrates the importance of developing as a writer and reader.
- Teachers provide opportunities for their students to celebrate each other's writing accomplishments.

Facilitator's Outline: Workshop 1

This outline of the Workshop 1 video contains approximate entry points for each section. Use this chart to help identify the pause points in the Watch the Video section. Zero your VCR counter at the Annenberg/CPB logo at the beginning of the tape.

Segment 1 (0:00–20:05)	Introduction (beginning at 0:00)	
	In the Classroom (beginning at 8:23) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Monday Meeting • Classroom arrangements that foster community 	Velvet McReynolds
Segment 2 (20:06–29:33)	In the Classroom (beginning at 20:06) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The read-aloud 	Jack Wilde
Segment 3 (29:34–41:10)	Interview (beginning at 29:34) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The teacher as writer 	Linda Rief
	In the Classroom (beginning at 30:28) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modeling participation 	Velvet McReynolds
	Teacher Discussion (beginning at 37:11) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sharing writing with students 	Vivian Johnson, Velvet McReynolds, and Jack Wilde
Segment 4 (41:11–end)	Interview (beginning at 41:11) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sharing student writing 	Jack Wilde
	In the Classroom (beginning at 43:39) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Celebration Circle • Making sharing safe for English language learners • Making sharing safe for all students 	Velvet McReynolds Mary Cathryn Ricker Vivian Johnson
	Interview (beginning at 51:01) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developmental traits of young adolescents 	Sue Swaim
	Teacher Discussion (beginning at 51:52) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instructional implications of developmental traits 	Vivian Johnson, Damond Moodie, and Allen Teng
	Interview (beginning at 55:55) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rewards of teaching writing 	Linda Rief

Workshop Session

Discussion and Sharing (15 minutes)

Choose one of the following discussion questions:

- In one of her interviews (which you can listen to on the *Write in the Middle* Web site at www.learner.org/channel/workshops/middlewriting/), teacher and writing expert Linda Rief describes how she begins the school year by having her students interview one another and write biographies of classmates or autobiographies of themselves. One advantage of this activity is that it promotes community by helping the students get to know each other. What do you do at the start of school to promote community among your students? Share a practice or activity that helps your students become acquainted with you, with one another, and with writing.
- In “Minimizing Writing Apprehension in the Learner-Centered Classroom (available under “Related Reading” on the Workshop 1 Web page), LaVona Reeves describes the practices she has adopted to help her students become more confident writers. She writes, “We are asking students to take ownership of their writing, to personalize knowledge, to write about their experiences, to be more expressive. We are asking them to be more reflective, to look within themselves to find meaning.” Do you agree that students should have more ownership of their writing? What forces and practices might work against students feeling empowered about writing?

Watch the Video (60 minutes video plus 30 minutes discussion)

Watch the video, stopping at the end of each segment (see the Facilitator’s Outline on the preceding page for help locating the pause points). If you are watching the workshop on your own, use your ongoing workshop journal to respond to two or more discussion questions from each of the four segments.

Segment 1 (0:00-20:05)

[Pause point: After the video montage on classroom arrangements and before Jack Wilde’s segment on read-alouds.]

- As Jack Wilde, Vivian Johnson, and Mary Cathryn Ricker point out in the introductory segment, one of the most basic components of a writing community is a feeling of safety. Think back to your own school experiences. Was there a classroom in which you felt particularly safe (or not safe) expressing yourself? What factors created this feeling? Share any strategies you use to help create an atmosphere of safety for your own students.
- What specific evidence do you see in Velvet McReynolds’ Monday Meeting of her students’ emerging sense of community? What specific strategies or practices does Velvet employ to foster community in her classroom?
- In your workshop journal, quickly jot down two or three ways in which the physical environment of your classroom works well and two or three things you’d like to change. Share and discuss your lists with your colleagues.

Segment 2 (20:06-29:33)

[Pause point: After Jack Wilde’s read-aloud segment.]

- The book Jack is reading to his students is *Small Steps* by Peg Kehret, a memoir of the author’s 1949 battle with polio and its aftermath. Share the titles of one or two books that have been especially appealing to your students and describe how you have incorporated them into your instruction.
- How might reading from a book and then using it as the basis for a mini-lesson help build a community of writers in the classroom? Would a mini-lesson similar to Jack’s lesson on the use of repetition in writing be effective with your students? Why or why not?
- Jack allocates about 15 minutes a day for his read-alouds, which he says are the single most important community-building activity in his classroom. Since he teaches fifth-graders, Jack’s schedule may have more built-in flexibility than the schedule of most middle-level teachers. If reading aloud is a regular activity in your classroom, how much time do you devote to it? If you don’t read aloud regularly, how much time is available in your schedule? Do you agree that this would be time well spent?

Workshop Session, cont'd.

Segment 3 (29:34-41:10)

[Pause point: After the teacher discussion on sharing writing with students.]

- Linda Rief believes that sharing writing with students is one of the most important ways for teachers to foster community in their classrooms. What are your thoughts about teachers sharing their writing in the classroom? If this is a practice you've already tried, what were the results?
- What makes "The Devil Made Me Do It" a particularly good choice for Velvet to share with her seventh-graders?
- Describe one or two effective classroom management and/or community-building practices you observed during Velvet's response session with her students.

Segment 4 (41:11-end)

[View to end of program.]

- What are some specific ways an activity like Velvet's Celebration Circle contributes to the sense of community in her classroom? What practices or rituals did you observe that added to that sense of community? Should everyone be required to participate in such activities? Do you think it's good practice to use this activity midway through the writing cycle, to share and celebrate revisions of unfinished narrative drafts? Why or why not?
- By giving them the choice of writing and reading in their native language as well as in English, Mary Cathryn Ricker has designed her poetry assignment to help her English language learners feel more comfortable with writing and with sharing. If your students read their writing to the class, what steps have you taken to make the experience less threatening? What strategies might help students whose background, temperament, or ability makes them reluctant to share?
- Share two or three ways in which your students' developmental characteristics have guided your instructional choices, especially in regard to writing instruction.

Going Further (15 minutes)

- In "Nancie Atwell's *In the Middle* and the Ongoing Transformation of the Writing Workshop" (available at the Workshop 1 Web site), Marcy M. Taylor states that *In the Middle: New Understandings About Writing, Reading, and Learning*, Nancie Atwell's 1998 revision of her seminal work, recognizes that "teacher knowledge—of genre, of conventions, of writing strategies, of effective writing behaviors—*also* has a place in the writing workshop alongside student choice." And in "Cultivating Our Garden, Atwell herself writes:

Instead of removing myself from the equation—functioning as a facilitator of the process who coordinates the workshop—I have come on like gangbusters in terms of teaching and expecting a lot in writing and reading workshop. And instead of diminishing or silencing their voices, I think that raising my voice, in the company of students in the workshop, has had the effect of strengthening theirs.

How do you balance your position as expert with your students' need for choice and independence? Is it enough to be a facilitator or should you intervene more directly in your students' learning? What are possible drawbacks to "raising [your] voice, in the company of students"? How did the teachers who appeared in the Workshop 1 video reflect Atwell's revised view of the writing workshop?

Before Next Week

Homework

- Complete your exploration of the Web site and of specific materials for Workshop 1. Record any comments or responses in your workshop journal to share with your colleagues.

Background Reading for Workshop 2

Before coming to the workshop session, you should prepare to participate by:

- Reviewing the materials for Workshop 2 provided on the Web site (www.learner.org/channel/workshops/middlewriting/) including the lesson plans for Damond Moodie and Allen Teng. These plans may be downloaded and printed, along with supporting classroom materials and samples of the students' writing.
- Reading the two articles provided under "Related Reading" on the Workshop 2 Web page and highlighting two or three sections that strike you as particularly useful or insightful, that raise questions in your mind, or that relate to your own practice. Record your responses to the articles in your workshop journal.
- Reviewing the "Key Practices To Observe in Workshop 2," available in this guide and on the Web site.

Selected Sources for “Creating a Community of Writers”

Atwell, Nancie. “Cultivating Our Garden.” *Voices From the Middle* 3.4 (November 1996): 47-51.

Atwell, Nancie. *In the Middle: New Understanding About Writing, Reading, and Learning*. 2nd Edition. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998. ISBN: 0867093749.

Augsburger, Deborah J. “Teacher as Writer: Remembering the Agony, Sharing the Ecstasy.” *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 41.7 (April 1998): 548-552.

Barbieri, Maureen and Linda Rief, eds. *Workshop 6: The Teacher as Writer*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1994. ISBN: 0435088165.

Browlie, Faye and Judith King. *Learning in Safe Schools: Creating Classrooms Where All Students Belong*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse, 2000. ISBN: 1551381206.

Brunce-Crim, Marna. “What Is a Writing Classroom?” *Instructor* 101.2 (September 1991): 36-39.

Calkins, Lucy McCormick and Shelley Harwayne. *The Writing Workshop: A World of Difference*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1987. ISBN: 043508450X.

Eggemeier, Judith K. “Developing the Craft of Writing in the Sixth-Grade Classroom.” *Primary Voices* 7.4 (April 1999): 23-32.

Elementary Section Steering Committee of the National Council of Teachers of English. *The Literate Life: Exploring Language Arts Within a Cycle of Learning*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1997. ISBN: 0814129765.

Finders, Margaret. *Just Girls: Hidden Literacies and Life in Junior High*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1997. ISBN: 0807735604.

Fletcher, Ralph. *Breathing In, Breathing Out: Keeping a Writer’s Notebook*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1996. ISBN: 0435072277.

Fletcher, Ralph and JoAnn Portalupi. *Writing Workshop: The Essential Guide*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001. ISBN: 0325003629.

Fountas, Irene C. and Gay Su Purnell. *Guiding Readers and Writers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001. ISBN: 0325003106.

Freeman, Marcia. *Building a Writing Community: A Practical Guide*. 2nd Edition. Gainesville, FL: Maupin House Publishers, 1995. ISBN: 0929895134.

Frost, Helen. *When I Whisper, Nobody Listens: Helping Young People Write About Difficult Issues*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001. ISBN: 0325003521.

Gleeson, Anne and Vaughn Prain. “Should Teachers of Writing Write Themselves?: An Australian Contribution to the Debate.” *English Journal* 85.6 (October 1996): 42-50.

Harwayne, Shelley. *Lasting Impressions: Weaving Literature Into the Writing Workshop*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1992. ISBN: 0435087320.

Knowles, Trudy and Dave Brown. *What Every Middle School Teacher Should Know*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2000. ISBN: 0325002665.

Langer, Judith A. *Effective Literacy Instruction: Building Successful Reading and Writing Programs*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2002. ISBN: 0814112943.

Manion, Betty Byrne. “Writing Workshop in Junior High School: It’s Worth the Time.” *Journal of Reading* 32.2 (November 1988): 154-157.

Selected Sources for “Creating a Community of Writers,” cont’d.

McIntyre, Ellen, Ann Rosebery, and Norma Gonzalez, eds. *Classroom Diversity: Connecting Curriculum to Students' Lives*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001. ISBN: 0325003327.

Moore, David, Thomas W. Bean, Deanna Birdyshaw, and James A. Rycik. *Adolescent Literacy: A Position Statement*. Newark, DE: IRA, 1999. Product: 1036-553.

National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association. *Standards for the English Language Arts*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1996. ISBN: 0814146767.

National Council of Teachers of English. *Motivating Writing in the Middle School*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1996. ISBN: 081415287.

Olafson, Lori and Margaret M. Latta. “Expecting, Accepting, and Respecting Difference in Middle School.” *Middle School Journal* 34.1 (September 2002): 43-47.

Phelan, Patricia. “A Classroom Community.” *English Journal* 80.7 (November 1991): 19-31.

Ramsey, Katherine D. “Middle Talk.” *English Journal* 90.5 (May 2001): 127-134.

Ray, Katie Wood with Lester L. Laminack. *The Writing Workshop: Working Through the Hard Parts (And They're All Hard Parts)*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2001. ISBN: 0814113176.

Reeves, La Vonda L. “Minimizing Writing Apprehension in the Learner-Centered Classroom.” *English Journal* 86.6 (October 1997): 38-45.

Rief, Linda. *Vision & Voice: Extending the Literacy Spectrum*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998. ISBN: 0325000972.

Rief, Linda. *Seeking Diversity: Language Arts With Adolescents*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1992. ISBN: 0435085980.

Rubenstein, Susanne. *Go Public: Encouraging Student Writers To Publish*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1998. ISBN: 0814118623.

Samway, Katharine D. and Denise McKeon. *Myths and Realities: Best Practices for Language Minority Students*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1999. ISBN: 0325000573.

Serafini, Frank. *The Reading Workshop: Creating Space for Readers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001. ISBN: 0325003300.

Strahan, David, Tracy W. Smith, Mike McElrath, and Cecelia M. Toole. “Profiles in Caring: Teachers Who Create Learning Communities in Their Classrooms.” *Middle School Journal* 33.1 (September 2001): 41-47.

Van Horn, Leigh. *Creating Literacy Communities in the Middle School*. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon Publishers, 2001. ISBN: 1929024428.

Whatley, April and Janda Canalis. “Creating Learning Communities Through Literacy.” *Language Arts* 79.6 (July 2002): 478-487.

Wolfe, Pat and Ron Brandt. “What Do We Know From Brain Research?” *Educational Leadership* 56.3 (1998): 8-13.

Wolk, Steven. *A Democratic Classroom*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998. ISBN: 0325000581.