

Teacher Talk: Developing Voice and Choice in Writing

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Rehearse, draft, revise, edit, share. While all of these are important, many authors would agree that without rehearsal—which can convince a writer that a topic is worthwhile—the commitment needed to develop a piece may not be there. This is especially true for child authors who need to understand that “powerful writing begins long before the draft” (Ray 1999, p. 89). According to Lane (1993, p. 159), “Finding a voice is a slow process that begins with teaching students to value their own experiences and perception and to write them down. . . . Voice is not something that can be taught in a step-by-step fashion.”

Thus, this article focuses on the importance of talk and how teachers might talk with their students, writer to writer, during rehearsal.

Does This Sound Like You?

Before I understood the importance of rehearsal, I too frequently used my firmest teacher stance and made un-supportive, silly comments to my students when they complained about having trouble finding a topic. I said things like, “Just sit down and think,” or, “If you would not waste your time complaining, you’d get something written. So get busy.” Does this sound familiar? Have you said things like this to your students? If you have, you are not alone. Like me, many teachers have made similar comments for lack of something better to say.

What Might You Do Instead?

When I read Don Graves’s book, *A Fresh Look at Writing* (1994), I was especially impressed with Chapter 2, “Learn from the Children.” In this chapter, Graves talks about the importance of learning about our students by listening to them. He states, “Through active listening, children become our informants.” Finding out what children know is important, for this informs our teaching.

I remember Mikey, a fifth-grade student who was disrupting the class by walking around moaning, “I have nothing to write about. I have nothing to write about. I have nothing to write about.” Mikey was not the kind of student who took kindly to being ordered to just sit down and write. So I had to find another solution. I sat with Mikey and

just chatted with him. He told me a funny story about how he and his half-brother threw eggs at some houses. The story was such a funny one that I just naturally started laughing. As is typical, the other students wanted to know what we were laughing about. I took advantage of the situation by asking Mikey to retell his adventures as other children joined us; that day Mikey told his story several times. Finally I said to the students, “Mikey said he doesn’t have anything to write about.” The students immediately chimed, “Write about the eggs!” Mikey did, deciding to change the names and write in the third person in order to protect the guilty. As chance might have it, Mikey was one of the winners in the Colorado Council of the International Reading Association’s statewide Young Authors Writing Contest.

Why did this rehearsal strategy work? Simply stated, telling his story over and over to an interested audience validated Mikey’s ideas and helped him find his voice. This process also helped him rehearse what he had to say so that when he finally did start to write, the ideas and words could flow.

Listening well also helped me with David, a fourth grader. David informed me that he hated to read and write, and I couldn’t make him do it. So instead of making him write, we talked, and I listened to him tell me about his pet chinchillas. At the end of our conversation, I asked David if he would be willing to teach me about his pet chinchillas and to help me remember by putting his thoughts on paper. Without hesitation, David responded, “Sure.” That was the day David became a writer.

Three Underlying Principles to Consider

- 1. Talk is important in rehearsal.** Even when children use drawing to rehearse for writing, talk is still necessary. Talking helps develop voice and choice.
- 2. Be the learner.** Position yourself at eye level and lean in when students talk about themselves. Enter your students’ worlds to discover what it is they have to say.

3. Put yourself in situations where you are writing and getting response. Know yourself as a writer; and reflect on the kinds of response you have found most helpful.

Graves (1994, p. 27) offers, "Unless we begin to understand what our students know, how they know it, and what they value about it, we waste their time. Worse, if our students think we don't know something special about them, which they value, they may find learning to be an isolated and meaningless exercise."