

Workshop 1: Creating a Community of Writers

Jack Wilde's Reflections

Helping students see themselves as writers

I think, in part, if I name them as a writer and have them feel that they are writers, that you take on, then you take on that persona. And I'm not sure I believe completely in the "Music Man," that I'm not sure you can say to somebody, well, you're a trumpet player, here's a trumpet, go. But I do think since this is something they all have had, some have had some practice with, feel that they have some knowledge about, that then if I call them writers, have the expectation of them to be writers, and then help inform them about what writers do, that they will fit into that—it's not really a mold, but sort of fit into that costume. And I think that that's important; that we're not just treating it as, you know, this is the work you've got to do to get a grade. You know, you've got to do this. No. This is really about learning a skill and a skill that you've already mastered to the extent that we can call you a writer.

Valuing the variety of talents in a community of writers

I think, in general, part of my responsibility as a teacher is to highlight everyone. And so I've got to be very careful not to feature some students over other students. But I think if we start to look at the different, the different tasks that are asked in a community of writers, we can start to realize that not everyone who writes well, or that people who write well are the only people who have an important responsibility in a community of writers; that, in fact, people who listen well have a role; that people who've got a sense of spelling or grammar have a role, just as with, I mean, with a publishing house, you've got people—you've got to have writers; you've got to have editors; you've got to have line editors—you've got to have all these different people serving the writing. And so if I can help my kids start to realize that the same can be true in our classroom; that yes, you're all going to be asked to write but that may not be your forte. Your forte may really be listening and raising issues for somebody else who writes. All right, good. Then we're going to use that. We're going to acknowledge that and we're going to use it. Or you may be a great speller. You may be good at coming up with titles. You may be good at illustrating. We're going to try to make sure that all of those go into this community of writers and that we don't just focus on text and generation of text.

Strategies to build a safe writing community from the first day

From day one, I want my kids to know that they're writers and that they are in a community of writers. So we start writing within an hour of the first day of school. And because I don't know them well the first day or the first couple of days, I have to try to find a way, again, to make it safe.

So what we actually do for probably about the first week and a half to two weeks is, number one, I'm writing with them so that they know I'm putting myself in the same position. What I'm asking them to do, I do. And at the end of the writing time—and it's shorter at the beginning because we don't have our writing muscles in good shape after a couple of months of swimming and going to camp and things like that—but what we do at the end is, we just go around the room and each student shares one sentence that they wrote. And that makes it safe because Kiana may have only written two sentences. She gets to share one. Whereas, Oreana may have written 25 sentences, so Oreana could sort of show off her facility at written language over Kiana's if I said, "Read what you wrote." So I'm going to try to democratize it and just say, "Each one of us just gets to read one sentence." And there's no response to it. So we don't hear a sentence and then say, "That was great." And I don't say to them, "Read your best sentence." I just say, "Read a sentence." And so day after day, they're getting their written voice out there and it's safe. Nothing untoward happens as a result of it and I'm doing it with them. So I'm reading a sentence that I wrote that day along with them.

And then as we get to the close of the second week and, of course, I've got kids saying, "I want to read it all," you know. "Can I read my whole story?" or "Can I read as much as I've gotten written?" Number one, that's exactly where I want them. They want their voices, they want more of their voices in the classroom. And then we've had a week and a half to shape their responding to the book I've been reading aloud to them and talking about what was effective, so they've got some sense of how to respond with some specificity, so that when we start hearing each other, we know how to respond. And that's going to keep building this community. It's going to keep it, hopefully keep it safe.

Importance of celebration in a community of writers

One of the other ways that the community gets, I think, gets extended and reinforced is celebration. So all communities celebrate. So we have several open houses through the course of the year where students share their writing and

all the work that's gone into the writing. And at that open house, again, we have to teach the parents how to receive the writing that our students have done. So at our open house, we'll have four or five children read to everybody, so read to 108 other students and their parents, to help in part show the parents that the correct response at this point is applause, is approbation for all this hard work.

Then they split up into their writing groups and go into a classroom with four or five students. One of the students is an emcee, so, again, we're trying to turn over the responsibility to them. And the emcee will introduce the student, and each student, in turn, will read all of their story, or if it's a long story, a section, an excerpt from their story. So, again, those four sets of parents can take it in and applaud, can celebrate all the work that was done. And I think that's critical.

I think if we just had our kids write and then say, "Okay, now take it home to your parents," so often the parent will say, "Well, I'll read it later" or "I'll, you know, I'll look at it." Or they'll look at it and say, "Well, this word still isn't spelled right. How can this be a final draft?" Okay. And so that's what the message to the child is, do you know what, despite all the hard work I put in, the only thing that matters is spelling. That's not the only thing or even the most important thing in the child's writing and the child's growth as a writer. So I do think that we can reinforce it. And later on our audience becomes the principal. So we have things going to the principal where, again, he can honor what, the work they've done, and celebrate it by coming into the room and acknowledging the work they've done, acknowledging what works well in their writing, and honor it by responding to it, by saying, because you've written this, this is what I'm going to do in the school, or this is what I'm going to consider in terms of changes in our school community.

Setting guidelines as a community

In building community, I don't tend to give a lot of rules. I don't think that's how a community gets established. So we don't spend the first day or the first week of school talking about a lot of rules. We're going to talk about how to make the classroom work. And, for the most part, those aren't, they're not really rules. They're just, what is it that we need—the degree of quiet that we need in the room to make it work. So we kind of acknowledge, this is what we, as a community, need to be able to do it.

And then when we move into having these conferences, I'm having a conference

group and the rest of the kids are working at their seats. So we've got to agree that I need to have my attention on the group. So what are issues that are going to come up so I can keep my attention there? Well, what if I need paper? What if my computer shuts down? What if I need to go to the bathroom? All those kinds of things. So we problem-solve those together as a community to diminish that. It's not my standing above them saying, "Here's the rule. This is what you've got to do." That's not a community. That's, I'm not sure it's a dictatorship, but it's certainly an autocratic stance. And I think what I want them, again, to appreciate is that together we're working on these things. They are things that matter not just to me but also to them.