

Making the Standards Fit the Kids, Rather than the Kids Fit the Standards

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Abstract

Do students and their learning needs set the agenda for instruction, or do the standards? During Writing Workshop, student choice and collaboration are encouraged and instruction must be purposeful. After two years of planning lessons based on the Ohio content standards for writing, I determined that my mini-lessons needed to change to meet the needs of my students. I also felt that student attitudes would improve if my lessons were more suited to their needs. Throughout this six-month study, photographs, student comments, Pod Casts, iMovies, survey results, and other work samples were collected to support the fact that student enjoyment increased during this study. After the student work samples were evaluated, I found that my students were able to achieve quality writing through this form of instruction. In addition, all of the first grade standards for writing were covered without planning lessons based on the standards.



Contents

Making the Standards Fit the Kids, Rather than the Kids Fit the Standards	1
Why is this Important?.....	2
Who Participated in this Study?.....	2
What Procedures Were Followed?.....	3
What Literature Supports This Study?.....	3
How Were Data Collected and Analyzed?	6
What Were the Results?.....	8
What Are the Implications?	10
Works Cited	11

Why is this Important?

Do students set the agenda for instruction, or do the standards? During my first two years of teaching, I was an avid rule follower and looked to the Ohio Content Standards to plan my lessons, always a week in advance, because the standards seemed to be an important part of classroom instruction. I was happy to have that list of standards because there was less thinking on my part to plan lessons, and I already had so much on my plate as a novice teacher.

Going into my third year, I began to think that my students would benefit more from writing instruction, particularly mini-lessons, that related to their specific needs. For the past couple of years, for the most part, I used my standard guides to plan my mini-lessons to make sure that I was covering all of the necessary material; however, my students did not seem enthusiastic about writing and we were not following a necessarily natural progression, rather moving from topic to topic as mandated by the standards. While I recognized the importance of standards, I felt that most of my students' specific writing needs would relate to the standards in some way, and that standards-based skills and concepts that were not reflected in their writing could be addressed through supplemental mini-lessons throughout the year. I found myself reflecting on my practices and thinking: *Would it be more appropriate for my students if I took my cues (both skill and topic related) from their writing, rather than strictly looking at a list of standards?*

I had a diverse classroom of writers, so I knew (from my previous two years of teaching experience) that some mini-lessons would need to be directed to the whole group, while others would be taught to a small group of students or even on a one-on-one basis. Directing mini-lessons to the whole group all of the time is a waste of time for my students, because some of them may already know the material, while others may not be ready for it. I thought that differentiating my instruction for my students would benefit them the most. And another question that kept coming up for me was: *Would writing be more enjoyable for my students if I planned my Writing Workshop according to their interests and needs?* According to Tukey (2002), "if individuals can make use of an array of different techniques, skills, and strategies that match their ability levels, they will have a much better chance of reaching their goals. And that success will motivate them to learn and discover still more" (p.40).

Who Participated in this Study?



I teach first grade at [Glacier Ridge Elementary](#), which is a K-5 building in the [Dublin City Schools](#). This year (2008-2009), I have 22 first graders (12 boys, 10 girls), and each one of them is an individual with different needs, strengths, and challenges. I have students that came into the year writing short stories



and others that could only write a few words. While the students largely come from upper-middle class homes, they are ethnically and linguistically diverse. In addition to White and Multi-racial children, I have Korean, Chinese, and Asian Indian students in my class. I have children that receive a variety of support services, including Speech, Reading Recovery, and English as a Second Language (ESL), all of which are set-up primarily as pull-out programs at our school.

One of my students also receives weekly support from the differentiation specialist (in addition to the help he receives in Reading Recovery).

What Procedures Were Followed?

I use Writing Workshop (Graves, 1994) as an approach to teaching writing because it is the model that my district believes will benefit students the most. It is an approach to writing that involves three main components: mini-lessons (focused instruction), independent practice (writing and conferencing), and sharing. A typical schedule for Writing Workshop in my classroom involves a 10-15 minute mini-lesson, followed by 30 minutes of independent practice, and finally 15-20 minutes of share time. However, share time is sometimes moved to the beginning of the schedule if there are students that are eager to share or I plan on using their writing as a model for the mini-lesson to follow. During Writing Workshop, student choice and collaboration are encouraged; my students choose their writing topics, genres, and formats and are welcome to work alone, with partners, or small groups.

The mini-lesson portion of Writing Workshop was the main focus of my study. I specifically planned lessons based on my students' emerging writing. By having conversations with them and allowing them to share their work with the class, I was able to plan appropriate mini-lessons based on their interests and needs. I also spent time during the independent practice stage, conducting small group and one-on-one mini-lessons with students who displayed similar writing needs, or had similar interests, that the rest of the class didn't necessarily have at that point in time.

What Literature Supports This Study?

Writing Workshop

“Due to a shifting focus to whole language, Writing Workshops came about in the early 1980s because classroom workshops were seen as consistent with the whole language

view” (Strech, 1994, p. 9); Writing Workshop pioneers include Donald Graves (1994), Lucy Calkins (1994), Nancie Atwell (Newkirk, 2007; Strech, 1994). They each have published books on writing instruction using the Writing Workshop approach and share many ideas about the implementation of a Writing Workshop. Graves applied the teaching practices of Donald Murray from the workshop/conference method employed in college writing classes to the elementary classroom (Newkirk). Two fundamental aspects of the Writing Workshop approach are that students are given choice and are able to speak and be heard, listen and respond (Calkins, 1994; Graves, 1994).

In the Writing Workshop, there is time set aside for speaking and listening so that writers may be heard, and practice responding to others. Students are encouraged to choose topics and talk freely about their ideas and the writing process. During the practice stage, students may conference with the teacher or their peers to gain feedback on their work, and use them as a sounding board for their ideas as writers and thinkers. Writing is a process that involves: modeling, practice, discussion, and *choice* (Cappello 2006; Newkirk 2007).

Thoughtfully planned mini-lessons are an essential part of any Writing Workshop. Lucy Calkins (1994) suggests several different categories for mini-lessons in her book, *The Art of Teaching Writing*. She encourages educators to include mini-lessons that: are particularly helpful to young writers; use literature to generate good writing; help students learn peer conferring; help children learn workshop procedures; help students learn revision strategies; and help students learn the qualities of good writing. The students’ own writing samples and developmental needs should also be taken into account when the teacher devises his/her mini-lessons. In Jasmine and Weiner’s study on the effects of Writing Workshop, they found that “the ideas for developing mini-lessons evolve daily in response to the needs of the students by careful examination of the children’s written products” (2007, p.132). Group rehearsal and independent rehearsal would come next, and entail brainstorming writing topics, modeling topic choice and illustrating as a pre-writing activity, and discussion based on student drawings (Ritterskamp, 2001). During the independent practice stage of the workshop, students are practicing strategies discussed during mini-lessons and working on writing pieces of their own choosing (topics stemming from their own personal experiences and interests). They also have an opportunity to confer with the teacher or their peers about their writing.

Talk is essential in the Writing Workshop approach. Students are encouraged to talk about: how to live as writers, what writers do, their own writing ideas, and writing feedback (Ray, 2001). The share session is a celebration of student work and good writing practices. According to Katie Wood Ray, “share time ... is a place where they can begin to feel what it’s like to have one’s ideas go public,” to be supported in their writing, and learn from one another (2001, p.174). Donald Graves (1996) suggests that teachers be involved in the share session with their own writing pieces to model the writing process that they are asking of



their students, including “how to critically read their own work” (p. 41). In the Writing Workshop approach, the teacher acts as a model and facilitator to the students.

Student Motivation

Intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation, as well as the role of the teacher, are common themes in the research on motivating students. In Metsala’s (1996) research on motivation related to literacy development and instruction, eight motives are depicted: involvement, curiosity, challenge, social interaction, compliance, recognition, competition, and work avoidance. The eight motives are categorized as either intrinsic or extrinsic. Metsala states,

Intrinsic motivations spring from personal interests and private experiences that develop into reasons for reading. These reasons include: involvement, curiosity, social interaction, and challenge. Extrinsic motivations originate with the teacher or the parent. Extrinsic motivations that students have reported to us include compliance, recognition, competition, and work-avoidance. Intrinsic motivations appear to be imperative to lifelong, voluntary reading (Metsala, 1996).

Bowen and Madsen (1978) focused on the teacher’s role in motivating students. They found that an educator’s teaching style can have a huge impact on a student’s motivation to learn. They examined teaching styles and pinpointed several characteristics of successful teachers that are believed to affect student motivation and result in more positive attitudes. The traits include: enthusiasm, warmth, high frequency of approval behaviors, spontaneity, flexibility, and sensitivity. They also believe that teachers must be trained with varying techniques to improve their own teaching style and presentation.

Nolen (2007) reviews the role of social context in developing literacy motivation. She finds that children are able to benefit from using their schema when they are allowed to choose their own topics based on their interests. This is consistent with the Workshop approach, which, when applied to writing, encourages children to activate prior knowledge and write about their own experiences and interests. The idea of the classroom as a community also plays a role in students’ motivation to write (Nolen, 2007; Ray, 2001).

In their study of first grade students and the effects of Writing Workshop, Jasmine and Weiner (2007) found that “the Writing Workshop approach contributed many factors to creating a positive writing atmosphere including: opportunities for students to choose what they wished to write, to work with peers, and to experiences individual time with the teacher” (p.138). They found that the introduction and practice of Writing Workshop increased their students’ overall writing confidence and enthusiasm,



which in turn motivated their students to want to write more frequently.

How Were Data Collected and Analyzed?

During Writing Workshop from September to April, I collected a variety of data sources. As a pre and post-measure, I developed a survey to determine my students' interest level in Writing [Figure 1]. The survey contained a 5-point rating scale for questions, ranging from *Not at All* to *A Whole Lot*. There were open-ended questions as a follow-up to some of the rated questions. In order to gain realistic insight into my students' interest in Writing, I explained the point of the survey to them, but had a parent volunteer give the survey to each of them individually. This allowed students to have support while completing the survey (if they needed help reading or interpreting the survey), but also hopefully decreased the tendency to answer the survey the way they thought I wanted them to answer it. This survey was used again at the end of the study to see how the responses had changed. Specifically, I looked at the surveys of students that started out the study saying that they did *Not* like writing *at All*, they liked it *A Little*, or they liked it *Some*.

Figure 1: Writing Survey Questions

1. Do you like to draw?
2. Do you think writing is fun?
3. Do you like to write in your spare time?
4. Do you like writing at school?
If not, what would make writing more fun for you?
5. Do/would you like writing stories about your own memories?
6. Do/would you like writing stories that are non-fiction?
7. Do/would you like writing stories that are make-believe?
8. Do/would you enjoy writing notes and letters to people?
9. What other types of things do/would you like to write at school?
10. Do you have trouble thinking about what to write?
11. Do you like to share your writing with others?
12. Do you wish you had more time to write at school?
13. Do you think you're a good writer?
14. Why do you feel this way?
15. Have you learned anything new as a writer this year?
If so, what lesson(s) has helped you the most?
16. Do you like to write things at home?
17. If you do, how often do you write at home?
18. What kinds of things do you write at home?

Across the six months, I kept a daily log. In the log, I wrote down the topics that were discussed, literature that was used, comments that the students made, and general observations. This log helped me to decide the topics and skills that would be introduced in our mini-lessons in the coming days and/or weeks. For example, lessons on incorporating dialogue into stories were introduced as many students became interested

in including speech bubbles and quotations in their stories, which could be included under the standard of Writing Conventions.

In addition, I collected an assortment of student work samples (hand written and typed using Pixie software). Then, I had the students choose what they thought was their best writing sample, and I completed a Writing Rubric [Figure 2], which I used as a way of creating a common assessment for student work. The Writing Rubric was developed by my district and was used to assess specific first grade writing standards.

Figure 2: Writing Rubric



Scoring Rubric

First Grade

Score Point	Content Standards: Processes 2,3,6,10 Applications 1	Organization Standards: Processes 5 Applications 1	Conventions Standards: Conventions 1,3-6
4 Effective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develops a main idea Supports a main idea with descriptive words and details Determines purpose and audience effectively Uses complete sentences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contains a simple beginning, middle and end 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Displays legible handwriting Displays complete sentences Displays correct spelling of high-frequency words. Displays readable phonetic attempts at spelling unfamiliar words Displays correct punctuation. Displays a few errors that do not interfere with meaning.
3 Adequate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develops a mostly complete main idea Supports a main ideas with some descriptive words and details Determines purpose and audience adequately Uses complete sentences in most cases. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contains a simple beginning, middle and end; one may be missing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Displays legible handwriting in most cases. Displays complete sentences in most cases Displays mostly correct spelling of high-frequency words Displays mostly readable phonetic attempts at spelling unfamiliar words Displays mostly correct punctuation Displays occasional errors that do not interfere with meaning.
2 Partial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develops an incomplete main idea Supports a main ideas with some details Purpose and audience are not clear Uses complete sentences in some cases 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contains a simple beginning, middle and end; one or two may be missing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Displays legible handwriting in some cases Displays complete sentences in some cases. Displays some correct spelling of high-frequency words. Displays some readable phonetic attempts at spelling unfamiliar words. Displays some correct punctuation Displays patterns of errors that sometimes impede meaning
Minimal 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does not develop a main idea Includes few details that do not focus on one topic Does not determine purpose or audience Uses complete sentences in a few cases. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contains a confusing storyline that makes it hard to determine whether there is a beginning, middle or an end 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Displays legible handwriting in a few cases Displays complete sentences in a few cases. Displays mostly incorrect spelling of high-frequency words. Displays unreadable phonetic attempts at spelling unfamiliar words. Displays limited correct punctuation. Displays patterns of errors that seriously interfere with meaning
0	Student attempts to respond, but response is off-topic, illegible, or insufficient or otherwise fails to meet requirements for a score of 1		

To complement the paper work samples, I collected electronic work samples created by my students in the form of Pod Casts and iMovies. They published the work samples of their choice with the help of some of the 5th grade students at our school. The Pod Casts are a computer generated auditory example of student work, while the iMovies are basically a video recording of a student reading their work and showing their own illustrations. They also used a [website](#) to generate visual representations of lists and interviews, and I used this same website to create visual representations of the survey results. Initially my students solely “published” their work by creating a final hand written copy or typed version in Pixie; however, the additional publishing options (i.e. Pod Casts, iMovies, and Wordles) were introduced in mini-lessons, as I began to see how enthusiastic my students were about the incorporation of technology, specifically through the use of Pixie. Although the publishing *options* were teacher-driven, the decision to offer more technology-related options was driven by student *interest* and *enthusiasm*.

Other data sources included photographs taken during Writer’s Workshop, a formal observation by my principal, and an audit of Ohio Content Standards covered during the six months that the study took place.

What Were the Results?

After six months of allowing my students to set the agenda for the writing instruction in my classroom, I was very pleased with the results. Based on the survey results of the question, *do you think writing is fun*, there was both a positive increase in the number of students that liked writing *A Lot* (increase of 11.1%), and those that liked it *A Whole Lot* (another increase of 11.1%) from the Fall to Spring. There was also a decrease in the number of students displaying negative attitudes toward writing. From the Fall to the Spring assessment, there was a 16.6% decrease in the students that only like writing *Some* (the biggest change in the results), and most importantly to me was the Spring result that there was not one student that said that they did *Not* like writing *at All* (a 5.5% decrease).

By using [Wordle](#) technology, I was able to create a visual representation of the results from both the Fall and Spring surveys. The answers given appear larger based on the frequency of the response; however, I did input each response once to show the options available. By looking at the “wordle” for each, I was able to see a visible, positive difference in my students’ writing attitudes from the Fall [Figure 3] to the Spring [Figure 4].

Figure 3: Fall Survey Results, “Do You Think Writing is Fun?”

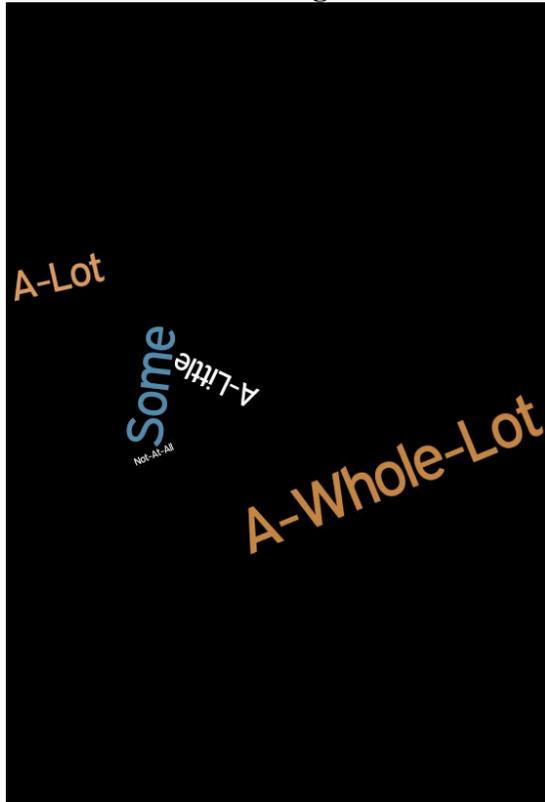
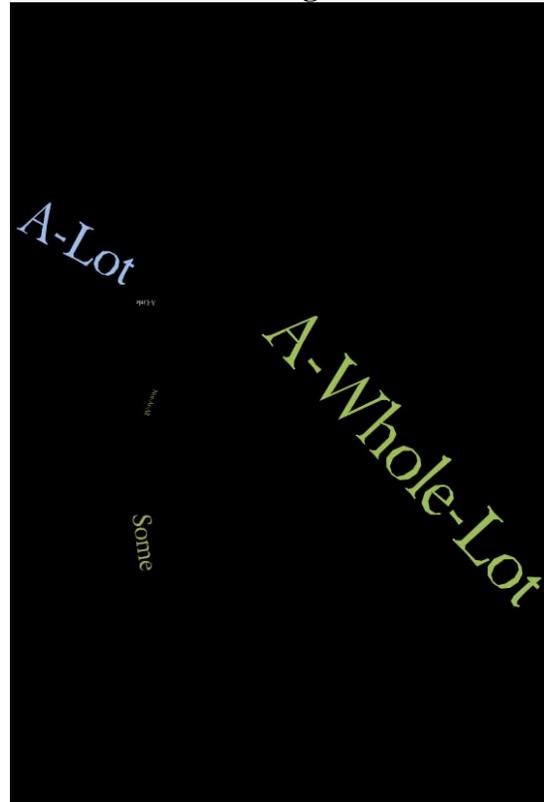


Figure 4: Spring Survey Results, “Do You Think Writing is Fun?”



By looking at the short answer sections of the survey, I was able to get input from my students on what they would like to change about the writing instruction. The majority of my students (95%) noted that they would like more time for writing at school, even though our writing block is 50-60 minutes everyday. This information showed me that the students must enjoy writing if they want more time for it in the school day. One student even told me, “Writing is my favorite part of the day. I even like it more than recess.” Throughout the study, my students became eager to write, and many were constantly asking to share their writing with the class. I was surprised, however, at the responses of some students who always sign up to share, but gave a response of *Not at All*, a little, or *Some* when asked on the survey, *do you like to share your writing with others*. Due to the increased enthusiasm to share their writing and my desire to give my students choice, I decided (part way through the study) to have a share sign-up, so that the students could choose when they would like to share their writing with the group. The sign-up was also a way for me to organize our share sessions and to make them fairer by allowing the same number (4) of students to share each day. In response to the survey question, *what would make writing more fun for you?*, one student wrote “at sharing time I think everybody that wants to share should share.” This showed me that maybe I should work in more students to the share schedule or try the “status of the class” procedure that some teachers use in their Writing Workshop, as a way of allowing every student to share at the beginning or end of each session (Stretch, 1994).

The photographs, student comments, Pod Casts and iMovies collected during the six month period further support the fact that student enjoyment increased during this study. I believe that the use of technology in various forms helped to make the difference in student attitudes from the Fall to the Spring. My students were more motivated to write and enthusiastic about doing so when they were able to publish their writing in some way, whether it was through sharing their typed writing with their peers or creating a Pod Cast (Figure 5) or iMovie (Figure 6).

Figure 5: [Student Pod Cast Example](#) (this is a Mpeg-4 file)

Figure 6: [Student iMovie Example](#) (this is a .mov file)

After allowing my students to set the agenda for writing instruction for six months, I went online to complete my [standards](#) audit and see if we had covered all of the Writing Content Standards for First Grade. As I looked through my printed version, I highlighted the standards that had already been covered by looking at my students' writing needs. Once I looked over the list, I found that I had highlighted all of the standards. Therefore, my audit showed that I was able to teach the standards that I needed to teach, while still maintaining student driven writing instruction.

After the student work samples were evaluated, I found that my students were able to achieve quality writing under this form of instruction. Based on the district rubric, the majority (86%) of my students' writing samples were categorized as either adequate or effective, and only a few (14%) of them scored in the partial or minimal categories. Because my students were able to choose the sample that they wanted to be evaluated, some of the scores were different than I would have expected. For example, one student chose a sample that was not nearly her best piece and ended up scoring less than effective, which I would have assumed she would have achieved. Next time, I would possibly go through my students' work samples and choose for myself which piece is their best; however, this would take some choice away from my students, which I encourage daily.

What Are the Implications?

To determine the implications, it's important to look back at my original questions:

- Would it be more appropriate for my students if I took my cues from their writing, rather than strictly looking at a list of standards?
- Would most of my students' specific writing needs relate to the standards in some way, or could they be addressed through supplemental mini-lessons throughout the year if they didn't?
- Would writing be more enjoyable for my students if I planned my Writing Workshop according to their interests and needs?

Because I am able to answer, “yes” to all three questions based on the evidence I have collected during my six month study, I would offer a few suggestions to school administrators and teachers to enhance their writing instruction and increase student motivation and enjoyment for writing. [Figure 7]

Figure 7: Suggestions for Administrators & Teachers

Administrators	Teachers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adopt the Workshop Model as an approach to teaching writing in their districts. (Calkins, 1994; Graves, 1994; Ray, 2001) • Consider operating under student driven, rather than standards driven curriculum. Using the students' work as a starting point for lesson planning is really the most appropriate for them and also covers standards in the process. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give students choice in activities at school. Students are more likely to enjoy activities if they are given choice. (Nolen, 2007) • Try different forms of technology with your students because that is an area in which many students have an interest. • Advocate for their students by asking your school district for funds or writing grants for technology. I think that some teachers would be surprised at what a huge impact the use of technology would have on their students engagement, enjoyment, and achievement in all areas, but writing specifically.

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