

1

Empowering Young Writers through the Writers Matter Approach

*At first, I hated writing and telling people what I had in my mind.
It was difficult for me at first. But now I feel I'd like to write a
novel.*

—Eighth-grade student, 2007

WRITERS MATTER staff meet with our teachers monthly to share the writing that takes place in their classrooms. During one of these meetings late last spring, we asked the teachers, “What is Writers Matter?” After a few moments of silence and some looks of puzzlement as to why we posed this question, we heard various answers.

“I tell my students this is not just writing. It is about social justice; its finding our voice and using it to make a change in the world.”

“It’s a motivational approach. My kids write more and are engaged more than ever before.”

“It’s a way for the students to see that they have a story, that their lives matter.”

“I use the literature that we’re reading and their writing to make personal connections to what they’re learning.”

As we listened, it quickly became evident that trying to define Writers Matter was a nearly impossible task for the teachers in our group, yet they were able to describe what Writers Matter *does for students* and how they use it.

We do not view this inconsistency as a deficit in this approach; quite the contrary. This is the heart of Writers Matter. It is not a program or a curriculum to follow but an approach to writing that empowers students to want to write that also connects to the curriculum. Just as this approach means something different to each of our teachers, we hope that, after reading this book, you will redefine what this approach means for you and your students. The quote at the beginning of this chapter illustrates the power of the approach to motivate and empower students to write and improve their writing skills.

The Writers Matter Approach

The Writers Matter approach to writing instruction begins by capitalizing on young and older adolescents' need for autonomy and to have a voice in the curriculum, using big ideas or themes to drive initial motivation and interest. Themes such as "I Am From . . .," "Teen Challenges," or "Family Matters" connect to adolescents' desire to express who they are as they search for identity. As they begin to learn about themselves and others, we further explore other themes, such as "Living Life" and "Dreams, Aspirations, and the Future" to help the students move into a more global perspective of who they are in this world and what they can do to change it. We have found that using intriguing adolescent-based themes leads to a strong interest in writing as students typically want to voice their opinions and explore their and others' identities.

Understanding that writing is a recursive process, students participate in daily writers' workshops to perfect their writing. Writers' workshops are used as the core method for improving writing skills through multiple drafts, conferences, and mini-lessons designed to individualize instruction to meet the needs of students based on progress they are making. Students are empowered to improve their writing since the focus is on becoming *writers* based on personal topics connected to their daily lives. As authors, students write for a purpose in much the same way that authors typically do, either by sharing their work in a public forum or by writing for a school or class publication.

Once students share their writing in a public forum, such as the classroom, their peers begin to recognize commonalities in their fears, dreams, and hopes for the future, which begins the process of diminishing barriers between diverse groups. Writers Matters classrooms transform into communities of learners because students *have a voice* in the classroom setting, and barriers between students and teachers are broken down *through discovering more* about each other. As interest and skill in writing increases, Writers Matter teachers are able to integrate writing into the core curriculum to meet state and local curriculum standards by drawing connections to literature and other authentic projects that *make writing an authentic tool for communication* that is more real to young and older adolescents. Writers Matter teachers continue to use big ideas or themes related to personal experience to help students see connections between themselves and the literature and content they are learning.

Over time, the Writers Matter teachers learn that, to make these strong connections, they also need to participate in the writing process. Through examples set by Atwell (1998) and Rief (1992), our teachers have come to learn that for instruction focused on writing as a process to be effective, teachers make a great impact. Atwell and Rief, as teacher researchers, documented what their students were able to achieve as a result of their encouragement, their support, and, most important, their own love of literacy. Underlying their work is the

basic premise that to be an effective writing teacher, you must be a writer yourself (Murray, 1982). These authors state that writing with your students might be the single most important strategy a teacher can use. Students are able to see an adult writing, something they rarely see, and their knowledge of his or her processes creates a supportive classroom in which the students are aware that the teacher is experiencing the same highs and lows of writing. The teacher also shares his or her writing as a model of good writing for the students.

In this role, the teacher allows students into his or her life, and students bring the teacher into their lives, as well (Atwell, 1998; Rief, 1992). The more the teacher gets to know her students, their writing, and their intentions, the better she is able to structure her mini-lessons and conferences around the specific needs of her students.

The teacher is the driving force in a Writers Matter classroom. It is the teacher's responsibility to read the ongoing development of students by knowing how to maintain enthusiasm for writing when it is high and to energize the students when they need it. There are many ways to do this, but it starts with knowing your students and understanding the process. Programs that have set out to standardize how a writers' workshop should be conducted lack this most important idea: Students determine the curriculum.

In a later chapter, we describe the writers' workshop process as an effective way to implement the Writers Matter approach and offer further aspects that contribute to the success of the program. But we still ask: What is effective writing instruction, and how do I know how to teach it?

Why Writing Instruction Matters

Writing is a skill that people use throughout their lives. The relationship between writing and an individual's personal growth, thinking, and skill development poses a challenge for many teachers interested in discovering new ways to motivate adolescents to improve their writing skills. Traditional writing curricula often focus on such tasks as answering questions, constructing five-paragraph essays in response to readings, and writing reports and essays. While a historical precedent exists for these forms of writing tasks, many of today's adolescents are less intrinsically motivated to improve their writing skills with traditional approaches. Adolescents write all the time through text messages, blogs, and social networks, yet school-based writing is a laborious chore for many tweens and teens. How can we motivate adolescents to *want* to write, work diligently to improve their writing skills, and foster an enhanced ability to think more broadly and critically about themselves and the world while acknowledging their voices in the process? That is the question that this book answers for teachers, administrators, and school personnel who are searching for ways to enhance their writing curricula.

As you begin your journey with us, you will discover that Writers Matter fosters more than improved writing among students. Participating teachers have found that this approach

- Produces a warm, nurturing classroom climate that enables students to flourish and succeed.
- Encourages enhanced teacher-student relationships and classroom management through the trusting and mutually respectful relationships that develop between teachers and students.
- Enhances adolescents' motivation to write, which, in turn, increases writing skill development.
- Encourages multiple perspective taking among adolescents, which breaks down cultural barriers and "cliques" that are part of the adolescent experience.
- Enhances deeper metacognition among adolescents and fosters greater motivation for academic success and pro-social behaviors.

In the shaded box, Dianna Newton, one of our Writers Matter teachers, shares why she uses this approach to writing instruction with her sixth-grade literacy students. During the writing of this book, Newton taught writing to seventh- and eighth-graders at Friends Select School in Germantown, and she shares her experience integrating Writers Matter into her curriculum in ways that enhance writing interest and motivation among her adolescent population.

Writers Matter

By DIANNA NEWTON, Seventh- and Eighth-Grade Literacy Teacher

Writers Matters is a powerful method to increase students' investment and engagement and has my students begging for writing periods and voluntarily using their lunch and break periods to show me their writing and conference with me to make it better. My students have experienced measurable gains with their writing. It is not a magic bullet or the newest fad but an approach built upon what we have known for years about students and writing. In fact, the Writers Matters approach to writing instruction is not new; teachers have been doing aspects of these strategies for years. When we ask our students to write about a topic they truly love; when we give students choices about their writing topics and genres; and when we have students share their dreams, hopes, and fears in their writing, we are using this approach. What makes it different from our individual, and oftentimes isolated, writing work with students is the

fact that it is organized around proven themes that middle school students care about. This structure provides my students with an entry point to writing through topics that mean something to them and present me with a way to create integrated units that connect their lives to the writing and reading curriculum.

My students have stories to tell, and they are eager to find their voices. They want to be listened to and respected. They want to be partners with me in their classrooms. My students are passionate and opinionated, and they are self-directed and engaged when involved in learning that is meaningful to them. My students appreciate choices, freedom, and autonomy. They want to be trusted enough to decide for themselves what to write about. Writing has long been a challenge for many teachers; I know it has been for me. Writing is an involved, multi-tiered process that takes time. Time is a precious commodity in schools, and I do not have enough time to teach writing using traditional approaches. This approach taught me how to incorporate more meaningful writing into my classes.

As Newton notes, Writers Matter fosters greater motivation to write and improve writing skills by paying careful attention to a universal adolescent need for autonomy and having a voice in the curriculum. It is a way to infuse writing into a curriculum already packed with content. Writers Matters classrooms are literacy-rich environments where students have ample opportunities to emulate good writing through access to numerous books and other forms of writing.

Effective Writing Instruction

Today we know that effective writing instruction occurs when the teacher plays a more significant role by facilitating not only procedural knowledge but also other strategies, such as the mechanics of proper writing. Studies conducted in classrooms using a process approach that includes more direction from teachers show positive effects on the quality of students' writing (Pritchard and Honeycutt, 2006).

Debbie Miller, a staff developer in the Denver Public Schools, coaches her teachers about the importance of modeling writing techniques and skills by providing direct instruction, demonstration, or insight into their thought process as they write. The students then have the opportunity to practice the technique in their writing. Miller stresses the importance of the lessons' emerging from careful assessment of the students. This assessment is the type used not

for grading but, instead, to guide instruction. Assessment takes place by conferring with the students, listening in on peer conversations, observing the students while they write, and learning from the students' written products (Miller, 2008, pp. 100–102). As the teacher studies and reflects on what she has learned from the students, she considers the next lessons.

Suskind's research in a second-grade classroom expanded this notion. She found that the students' stories were not just "adjuncts to instruction but the foundations of the classroom" (Suskind, 2007, p. 11). When teachers base their lessons on the needs and voices of the students, she found, the students' stories became the curriculum in the classroom: "In essence through story and with the support of their teacher, the children wrote and rewrote the curriculum to reflect their lives, becoming co-generators of classroom knowledge" (p. 11). Suskind concluded that curriculum cannot be defined simply by state standards but should be redefined as "a boundless entity that provides a framework for students' wonderings as they take on the role as curriculum makers" (p. 16). When instruction is based on the needs and desires of the students, teachers must engage in frequent evaluation of their students to guide the instructional decisions they make.

However, we must keep in mind that evaluation is at the core of state and national standards for literacy and writing. The Common Core Standards for literacy focus on integrating writing throughout the curriculum, which is an ultimate goal for Writers Matter teachers. Later chapters discuss how to develop units of instruction and service activities that connect writing to literature, history, and other subjects. This is a crucial aspect of the approach, since writing is an integrative process that connects all content areas in the curriculum.

Connections to State and National Standards for Writing Instruction

In speaking with numerous English and literacy teachers over the years, we have discovered that writing typically does not receive sufficient emphasis in the literacy curriculum because of the strong need for students to reach proficient levels in reading. However, with a growing emphasis on the development of writing skills, as demonstrated by the recent incorporation of writing proficiency into many state tests, the writing curriculum is receiving more attention than ever before. The Writers Matter philosophy seeks to integrate writing into traditional English curricula, as well as across disciplines, through writing themes designed to encourage students to make meaningful personal connections among self, the community, and the world. The themes used in Writers Matter universally connect to adolescents and the literature they are required to read and understand.

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) standards encourage the development of practices that take into consideration the literacy abilities

that students bring to school). The standards, when viewed holistically, center on enhancing all aspects of literacy in an integrated manner, using multiple strategies, with a seminal goal of students' employing their "literacy abilities to accomplish their own purposes." A major goal of spoken, written, and visual language (conventions, style, and vocabulary) is to be able to communicate in a clear and articulate manner to a variety of audiences. Most state standards in English and language arts conform to NCTE standards. For example, in the State of Pennsylvania, expectations for students in grades 8–12 center on writing for different purposes and audiences, using poetry, short stories, and plays, as well as demonstrating proficiency in three types of writing: narrative, informational, and persuasive. Also emphasized is *quality of writing* in the form of focus, content, organization, style, editing, and conventions. The Writers Matter approach seeks to address all areas of literacy, including speaking, listening critically, and responding intelligently using writing as a primary tool.

The Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects (known informally as "the Standards"; see http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI_ELA%20Standards.pdf) are K–12 standards to ensure that all students are college- and career-ready in literacy. The Standards establish requirements not only for English language arts but also for literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects. Students must learn to read, write, speak, listen, and use language effectively in a variety of content areas. The literacy standards for sixth grade and above intended for English language arts, history and social studies, science, and technical subjects encourage teachers to use their content area expertise to help students meet the particular challenges of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language in their respective fields. As we will see in later chapters of this book, the Writers Matter approach fully embraces the Common Core Standards for writing through the teaching of writing in and across content areas.

While national, state, and local standards provide an important structure to guide curriculum and, ultimately, the lessons taught in the classroom setting, integration is important. Time constraints make curriculum integration a priority to address all standards and, more important, to make learning more meaningful for students. From a holistic perspective, the Writers Matter approach demonstrates how teachers can integrate writing and public speaking more formally into the traditional literacy curriculum in a manner that is motivating to young and older adolescent populations.

Many published, scripted, and formulaic writing programs attempt to help teachers incorporate these high-stakes standards into their curriculum. The problem with these programs is that they focus solely on curriculum and assessment and thus do not take into account the fact that most learning takes place in the process of writing, not in the final product. These programs also do not consider the unique characteristics of students or the expertise of teachers.

The Writers Matter approach provides a structure that integrates the curriculum into students' lives, allowing students to have a voice. It also gives teachers the flexibility to tailor the curriculum to the diverse needs and interests of their students.

School-Based Writing That Is Empowering and Motivating

This chapter provides an overview of the Writers Matter approach as it relates to current thinking in the field of literacy. Our Writers Matter teachers commonly agree that this writing approach both empowers their students and motivates greater effort and achievement among them through the use of intriguing adolescent themes.

Intriguing themes stimulate interest and motivation in writing, which sets the stage for students to work on improving their writing skills. Writers Matters supports the notion that writing is a recursive process and that classroom routines therefore must be flexible to allow students to write often. Good writing occurs only in a literacy-rich environment, where students are reading and writing in an integrative manner and the teacher writes along with her students. Effective writing instruction stresses the importance of the teacher's role as model and coach. Lessons emerge from a careful analysis of students' writing. Good writing instruction emerges from students' needs and is guided by writing standards. The Writers Matter approach complements NCTE, state, and Core Curriculum Standards in this way. The importance of viewing literacy—and, particularly, writing instruction—as an integrative function of good teaching across all content areas is a primary issue addressed through the Writers Matter approach.

The most important aspect of the Writers Matters approach is that it empowers young writers, as this book will show.