

Living a Genre

Collaborative Writing about Shared Experiences

Trying new things is always better when we do it with others—risks aren't taken alone, and successes can be celebrated together. When we ask students to write within a new genre, authentic collaborative practice can build the foundation they will stand on as they tackle this new work independently in the days to come. Collaborative writing practice is made even more powerful when focused around a relevant shared experience.

Each moment of the teaching day is sacred—it can be hard to imagine adding anything to an already packed schedule. But providing young writers with even eight to ten minutes of relevant shared experiences will ultimately serve as a tremendous support for their understanding of upcoming independent work.

Why only eight to ten minutes? In a recent article about attention (Conyers and Williams 2015), the authors explain, "...we've found that a useful rule of thumb is to focus on presenting new information in roughly eight-minute 'chunks' to keep students' attention resolute on learning." The authors also suggest keeping these experiences related to students' lives, which evokes emotions that enhance attention and can capitalize upon our students' natural sense of curiosity through inquiry.

What do these shared experiences look like?

The kinds of shared experiences that create fodder for shared writing within a new genre often take the form of conversations or debates, sometimes in response to media, an artifact, or a longer field trip experience. They might also involve actively engaging with a relevant topic—cooking, following a set of instructions, and so on. See below for a brief list of ideas.

- To support opinion writing: sharing our opinions with others
 - Making recommendations of favorite places, toys, movies, foods etc. for peers (for example, students work in partnerships to orally recommend a favorite neighborhood playground, making sure to include supporting reasons)
 - Having dialogue about enacting change (for example, teacher facilitates a class discussion about the need for a formal school recycling and composting program)
 - Watching commercials to analyze persuasive techniques, intended audience, language, reasons vs. evidence (for example, students are divided into small groups in order to watch an "As Seen on T.V." commercial for specific persuasive techniques then have a whole-group discussion on how the advertisement attempted to convince them that they must have the product being sold with the various persuasive techniques)
- To support informational writing: teaching others about topics of interest and/or topics studied and researched as a class
 - Organizing and sorting information based on commonalities (for example, after visiting a firehouse, police station, and post office, students have a discussion, comparing and

- contrasting how the various service workers support their community)
- Cooking or following recipes together (for example, after students grow vegetables or fruit together in a class garden, they follow a recipe to create a salad or smoothie using the vegetables they grew)
- Creating artifacts by following step-by-step instructions (for example, students work together in small groups and follow a set of directions that helps them plant a variety of seeds and gather proper amounts of soil, water, and gardening supplies to support their work)
- To support narrative writing: sharing our stories with others
 - Telling shared class events with clear structure and development, building upon each other's ideas sequentially to show how an event unfolded (for example, students meet in partnerships to recount a school concert they recently attended then come back together as a whole-class circle and share the story of attending the concert bit-by-bit from beginning to end)
 - Orally creating realistic fiction stories by twisting real-life events, problems, and/or solutions (for example, students work in triads sharing a problem they have faced and how the problem was resolved, then partners support each other in exaggerating or revising their problems and solutions, playing with different combinations that make sense and could transfer into a realistic fiction story)

When during the unit will these shared experiences take place?

It works best to insert the shared experience that will become the foundation for shared writing in a new genre a week or so before launching the new writing unit of study. This gives students a jump on becoming familiar with the structure of the genre. As the unit unfolds, you can continue to build in these shared experiences a week or so before moving to a new phase in the writing process to focus on revising for craft, elaboration, and editing for language conventions. For example, you might revisit a shared experience, storytelling the events again to focus on what was being said (dialogue). After storytelling, you could revise the original shared writing piece to include the dialogue that students recalled during the most recent storytelling experience.

When during the school day will these shared experiences take place?

These experiences could be tucked into your day at any point. Because they are a precursor to the minilessons and independent work that will be done the following week, there is no need to tie the experience to a particular time of day. You might include these shared experiences during transition times, after morning meeting, right after students return from recess, or any other time during the day when you can carve out a spare ten minutes.

How do we move from shared experience to shared (collaborative) writing?

Collaborative or shared writing paves the way for children's independent work within a genre. Once your class has had the shared experience you've planned, you'll write about it together, within the new genre. This is not interactive writing where students and teachers share the pen; rather, the teacher tends to scribe the piece as students collaboratively invent it. The experience of writing collaboratively supports students' independent work and also provides a class-created mentor text to go along with other mentors you've undoubtedly collected.

For example, in Michelle Miller's second grade at Maplemere Elementary School in Amherst, NY, the children were entering into a unit on persuasive writing. Michelle planned a shared experience for the

class in which they met in partnerships to debate what they wanted to change within their classroom. This experience led children to decide that they should have a class pet - and that they needed to convince their principal why this was important to them.

Next came the collaborative writing piece. With Michelle's support, during a brief class discussion, the class teased out an introduction, three supporting reasons and a conclusion for their letter. Figure 1 shows the planning boxes Michelle used to capture their thinking. She wrote one/two words or drew a simple sketch to capture their opinion: introduction (first box), supporting reason(s) (middle three boxes), and conclusion/restated opinion (fifth box). This plan was created with students during one session of shared writing.

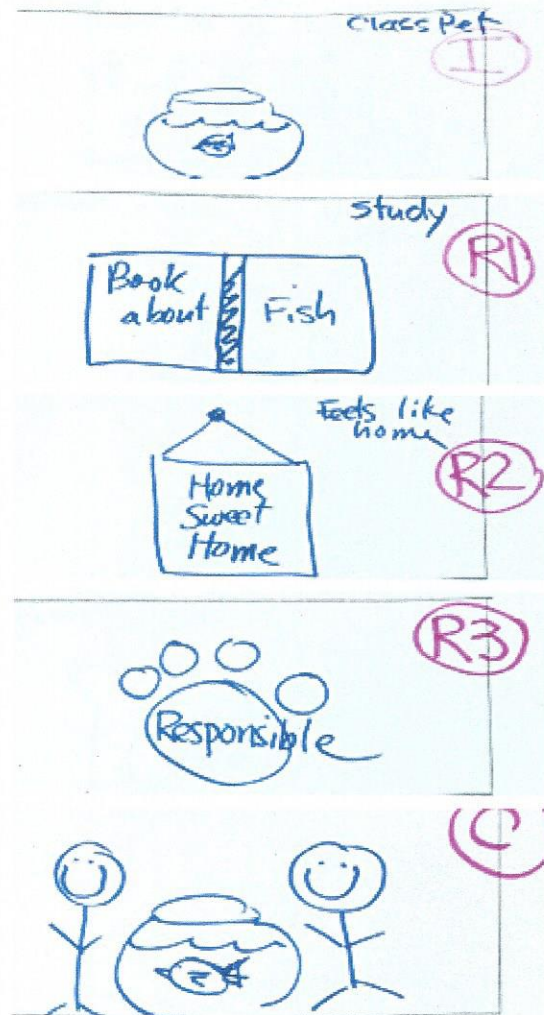
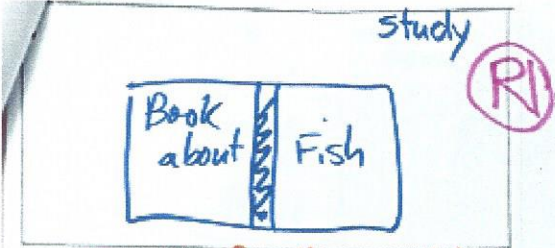


Figure 1

During a second follow-up session of shared writing later in the week based on the plan in Figure 1, Michelle supported students to collaboratively write a five page persuasive letter, seen in Figure 2.



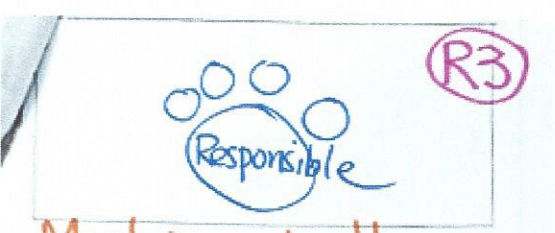
Dear Mrs. Laudisio,
We want one. We need one. ~~We~~ ^{we} really, really ~~got to~~ ^{got to} REALLY want a class pet fish!



First of all, we like to study animals. If we have a pet we ~~good~~ could learn about the fish... what it eats, how it moves, how it breaths, and interesting facts!



Another reason why we ~~that~~ should have a class pet fish is because it would feel like home. We are a family and the fish would be a part ~~of~~ our family too. It would help us not be sad and miss our homes.



Most importantly, we ~~will~~ ^{will} be take responsibility for our fish. This will help us learn to ~~X~~ use Paw Pride. We will clean the tank ~~and~~ ^{and} ~~we~~ ^{we} will feed it everyday!

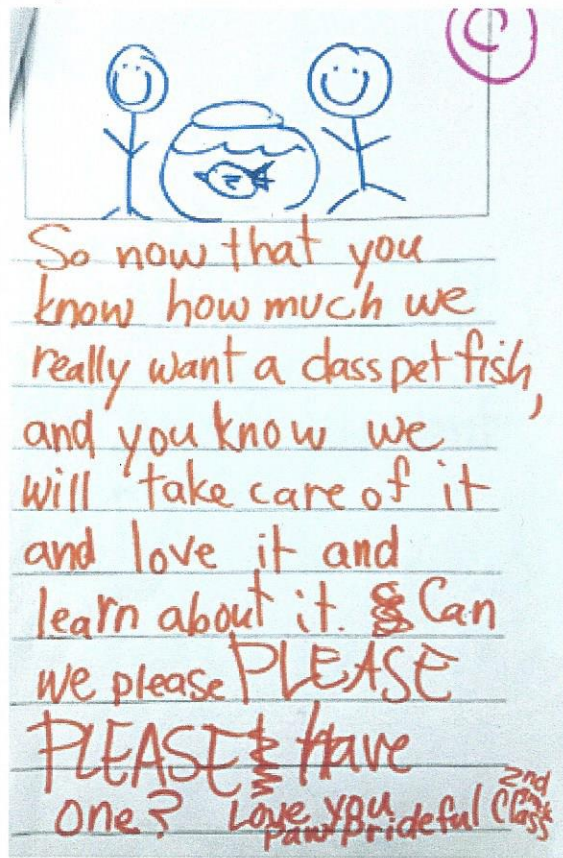


Figure 2

This piece of writing, along with the planning template from the first session of shared writing, became a mentor for the children as they launched into their own independent writing of persuasive letters. Once children have experienced writing together in a new genre about an event they've shared, they will be primed to launch into trying this new work on their own, and they'll have the touchstones of the shared experience and the shared writing to support their work!

Works Cited

Wilson, Donna, and Marcus Conyers. 2015. *Strategies for Getting and Keeping the Brain's Attention*. Edutopia, Brain-Based Learning, 6 January. <http://www.edutopia.org/blog/strategies-getting-keeping-brains-attention-donna-wilson-marcus-conyers>.

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Olivia Wahl

Olivia Wahl has been an educator for sixteen years. She provides PreK–5 staff development in literacy instruction, focusing much of her time in school districts in New York, New Jersey, Indiana, North Carolina, and Washington. Olivia has participated in coaching groups with the Reading and Writing Project at Columbia University’s Teachers College in New York City.

She has led institutes for teachers nationwide. Institutes have focused on helping teachers establish structures and routines needed for a successful launch of the reader’s and writer’s workshops in addition to teaching within a balanced literacy approach, conferring and assessments, matching students to texts, and planning for a gradual release of responsibility.

Olivia holds a Master’s degree in Curriculum and Instruction and has most recently been working on backwards planning and mapping out curricula. Her curriculum work involves considering the reading/writing demands of various genres and understanding how national standards align with the gradual release of responsibility and the balanced literacy approach. Olivia also provides quality professional development that directly impacts best teaching practices while collaborating with principals, supporting their work in cultivating powerful learning communities. Her work with school districts across the country entails working with superintendents, principals, literacy coaches, and teachers to design and implement curricula focused on nurturing students within a balanced literacy framework.



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