

By Regie Routman

Reflections on Literacy Teaching and Learning

A LONG WITH MY ESTEEMED COLLEAGUES, Nancy McLean and Sandra Figueroa, I was privileged to conduct a writing residency in an elementary school in Winnipeg in late May 2011. (See Weekly Plan for School Residency for how the residency model works.) Rosana Montebruno asked me to write a brief article reflecting on that experience with a focus on effective literacy practices.

Based on that residency as well as previous residencies in the United States and Canada, I would like to highlight three core practices that I see as essential for raising and sustaining literacy achievement, engagement, and enjoyment for students, teachers, principals, and curriculum specialists.

1. Engage learners' hearts and minds.

If we want students and teachers to put forth their best efforts with energy and enthusiasm, the work must be academically and culturally relevant, authentic in its content and form, directed to an audience and purpose that matters, and doable by the learner with minimal support. With all that in mind, the very first thing I do in a residency is to try to bond with students and teachers by connecting with them through stories. I always begin our work together by sharing personal stories and family photos and by talking about my life in terms that the students and teachers can, hopefully, relate to and understand. I also read carefully chosen literature, a book or two—and most often it is nonfiction—that I have selected for its rich content, vocabulary, interest, effective writing, relevance to the curriculum and children's lives, and the text's message of hope and possibilities.

Especially in teaching writing, once I have captured students' hearts and minds, for example, by having them write about a topic they are excited about, I can teach them everything they need to know about grammar, skills, organization, spelling, revising editing, and so on. But without that emotional investment from students—and teachers too—it's hard to teach much that will stick. It was telling that at the end of my writing residency at Heritage School, one of the teachers insightfully commented, "We have no reluctant writers here." Even though they acknowledged there were writers who were struggling, teachers now believed that with the "right" topic, every student could become "a writer."

As an example, when working with students in Jen Shabaga's grade 3/4 class at Heritage School, we chose a topic that students immediately embraced: making a detailed book about Heritage School for incoming families, new students, the school library, and other classrooms. (see sample pages) Students got so caught up in brainstorming ideas for topics and, then, choosing the topic they wanted to write about, they stayed engaged even though it was time for recess. In writing and brainstorming, we focused on the content first, keeping our readers in mind at all times. Once the content was clear, descriptive, and engaging, the focus shifted to an emphasis on COPS (capitalization, organization, punctuation, and spelling,) which students now willingly took on. They understood and valued the audiences and purposes for their writing, recognized that writers write for readers, and that readers expect that writing to be clear, interesting, well organized, and error free in regard to accuracy of content, spelling, punctuation, and grammar. Here's a comment from Jen in a recent email (July 16, 2011):

Our book, *If You're Not From Heritage School...* is a HUGE success! The students and I are so proud of it... Within my own classroom, we showed off the book to all the parents at our room's Celebration of Learning and I had the chance to tell the parents how proud I was of their children.

2. Rely on an optimal learning model.

For all of my teaching and coaching, I rely on what I call the Optimal Learning Model (See Optimal Learning Model sheet). The OLM is primarily a learning model to ensure success for the learner (student, teacher, principal) at every stage of learning. While gradual release of responsibility is an important part of the model, the focus is always on the learning. That is, effective and sufficient demonstrations and shared experiences by an expert enable the learner to successfully "try and apply" what has been previously taught. As the learner takes charge in the guided and independent practice stages, he/she "holds the book or pen" and has sustained time "to do it," with appropriate support, as needed and judged by ongoing assessment, i.e., responsive teaching. I often call the OLM the "I do it," "We do it", "We do it", "We do it," "You do it" model because learners usually need much more support and scaffolding--in risk-free, safe, learning environments--than we educators typically provide, especially as students move into the older grades.

In particular, adding sufficient and effective shared experiences—the “we do it”—to our teaching ensures success. Here is where the learner is free to give his thoughts and ideas without fear of failure and without having to do the actual composition or reading or some other task on his own. An expert, usually the teacher, is right there to affirm the learner, show him how to “do it”, encourage participation, and help shape the learner’s thoughts and actions. Shared experiences are especially critical for second language learners and learners who struggle. While taking lots of time for shared experiences may seem to slow down the teaching, in the long run we are hurrying up the learning for many students. Once students are released to “try and apply it”, whether it’s, for example, reading a selection for the author’s purpose or writing a poem about something important to them, most students have the necessary tools, strategies, and confidence to begin to take on the work in earnest.

3. Focus on what’s most important for the learner.

A teacher recently said to me, “I’ve figured out, after many years, that good teaching is not about the perfect lesson plan; it’s all about the learner and the learning.” Effective literacy teaching means we’re responsive to the learners in front of us, and we notice and respond to their strengths as well as their weaknesses, even when the curriculum is mandated. Through whole class and small group teaching and, especially, conferring one-on-one with students in reading and writing, we are constantly assessing the learners’ strengths and needs. Especially, one-on-one, it’s easy for us educators to seize on the weaknesses of the learner and focus solely on “improvement.” We need to constantly be asking ourselves the question—in the act of teaching as well as before and after—“What’s the most important thing the learner needs at this time to move forward?” It might be just noticing and commenting on all the things the learner has done well, small as these items might be; re-teaching a concept; allowing substantial and sustained time for guided and independent practice of what’s been taught; or providing students more choice, but choice within a carefully delineated structure that students understand. “Less is more.” We can’t do it all, but we can figure out what’s truly most significant to do for the learner, at this moment in time, and put our—and their—energies there.

Focusing on what’s most important for the learner means focusing first on the writer and second on the writing. It means celebrating learners and setting up the environment so all students experience success. A recent example comes to mind. When first grade teacher April Waters and I were collaborating on teaching poetry writing at Heritage School

this past May, as part of applying the OLM in the “we do it” stage, we conducted scaffolded conversations with a few students (with the whole class looking on and listening) before we released students to write poems on their own. Although Robert wound up writing a great poem about a topic that was important to him and we charted his poem-in-process in front of the whole class, it took about twenty minutes for that one public conference. Afterwards, I asked April to tell me more about Robert (whose name is changed to protect his privacy.)

As for Robert, you may (or may not) be shocked to discover that he’s the reason I have an EA in my classroom...As a student, he’s fairly average, but was a habitual crier every time he had to write something. He’s a BIG perfectionist, terrified to make a mistake when he’s writing, and as a result will shut down when it’s time to write. When I saw his hand up to write a poem with us last week, I chose him immediately because I wanted him to have success with this. I wasn’t surprised in the least when we had to work our tails off with him (very typical with Robert), but he was so excited with the result, and it was way easier for him to start today on his Father’s Day poem. (email, June 2, 2011)

Not only that. Taking the time for that extended, public conversation changed everything for Robert. He came to see himself as a writer, and he became a full member of the literacy community. Moreover, that writing success boosted his confidence and competence in other areas as well.

Final Thoughts

Teachers say, “I don’t have time to spend twenty minutes with one student” or “I don’t have time to slow down.” We don’t have time not to. In Robert’s case, that twenty-minute conference was a powerful vehicle not only for focusing on one student but also for holding the rest of the students responsible and accountable to apply to their own work what had just been demonstrated, explained, and discussed. Taking time to go in-depth with one student in a public conference can shorten up conferences with other students, and that saves time in the long run. Perhaps, most important of all, Robert and his peers—just like the third and fourth graders in this article—did well because the work they were supported to do was meaningful, engaging, and enjoyable. It’s worth stating the obvious: work is easier to do for all of us when we find it pleasurable and meaningful, it taps into our interests, and we have some choice in what we are being asked to do. 🌀

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Weekly Plan for School Residency

The purpose of the residency is to provide the same model for teachers and principals that excellent teachers provide for students, that is, a teaching/learning/assessing model that includes much scaffolding and builds confidence and competence through demonstrations, shared demonstrations, guided practice, and independent practice—all with challenging and relevant curriculum and content. The learning model is a coaching model that gradually releases increasing responsibility to the learner so that the learner eventually self-directs, self-evaluates, and sets worthwhile goals.

Before my visit, the principal or an instructional leader in the school surveys teachers for interests, needs, questions, and concerns regarding the chosen residency focus, usually reading or writing. The principal or instructional leader makes me aware of goals at each grade level and across grade levels, and together we draft a weekly plan/schedule and determine necessary resources.

The plan usually includes:

- A weekly (3–5 day) teaching plan and focus (for the entire morning) in both a primary classroom and an intermediate classroom that involves a daily 2 hour flexible block with the same students and teacher, in their respective classrooms
- Demonstration teaching (each day)
- Gradually moving to coaching each of the host teachers in their classrooms—by teaching alongside them (by the end of the week) and by guiding and supporting them as they try out what I have been demonstrating
- Daily, voluntary after school professional conversations focused around the morning lessons, whole school beliefs, the school's vision, and effective teaching practices.
- One whole staff, interactive literacy workshop (2 hours) on our curriculum focus
- Time on the first day to tour the school, meet teachers and students, and to finalize planning by meeting one-on-one for 15–30 minutes with each host teacher.
- A 2 hour, afternoon, coaching block with the principal, who may be joined by the assistant principal and instructional coach.

For each demonstration lesson in a classroom, teachers at the grade level and adjacent grade levels are released to observe in the host classroom. (The principal or instructional leader works out a plan, often using roving substitutes to make this observation possible.) Teachers have an opportunity, before and after the lesson, to comment and raise questions. Teachers are encouraged to try out what I have been demonstrating.

Each 2 hour literacy block is flexibly structured as follows:

- 30 minutes to meet with teachers and discuss lesson purpose and contents, what to watch for, answer questions, clarify thinking
- 60–75 minutes of demonstration teaching and working with students (with teachers and the principal observing) in the host classroom
- 15–30 minutes debriefing (explaining why I did what I did—for example, changing my initial plan to meet students' needs—answering teachers' questions, and asking them, “What did you notice?” and discussing next day's plan and the rationale for it.)

Devoting the entire afternoon to coaching the principal grew from the crucial realization, after 10 years of doing residencies, that whole school, high achievement, does not occur without strong principal leadership. Much of our afternoon is spent on instructional walks in classrooms where I demonstrate what to look for, what to say, and how to coach and support teachers “on the spot” so that teaching and learning move forward in a very positive way.

The above residency model, combining dialogue and demonstrations, supports the importance of “conversation” which is where the bulk of the learning for teachers and principals occurs. 🌱

Regie Routman, revised April 2011

An Optimal Learning Model—OLM

TO LEARNERS	WITH LEARNERS		BY LEARNERS
<p>I DO IT</p> <p>Demonstration</p> <p>TEACHER shows how to do it</p> <p>STUDENT listens, observes, minimally participates</p> <p>INSTRUCTIONAL CONTEXT explanation, reading/writing aloud</p>	<p>WE DO IT</p> <p>Shared Demonstration</p> <p>TEACHER leads, negotiates, suggests</p> <p>STUDENT questions, collaborates, responds reading/writing</p> <p>INSTRUCTIONAL CONTEXT shared reading/writing</p>	<p>WE DO IT</p> <p>Guided Practice</p> <p>STUDENT takes charge, approximates, practices</p> <p>TEACHER encourages, clarifies, confirms</p> <p>INSTRUCTIONAL CONTEXT guided reading/writing</p>	<p>YOU DO IT</p> <p>Independent Practice</p> <p>STUDENT initiates, self-directs, self-evaluates</p> <p>TEACHER affirms, coaches</p> <p>INSTRUCTIONAL CONTEXT independent reading/writing</p>
<p>↑ HANDOVER OF RESPONSIBILITY ↑</p>			

REGIE ROUTMAN