Writing Boxes

The Reading/Writing Connection Supporting Literacy in the Library

LISA VON DRASEK

Making reading and writing fun at the library.

In 1993, I was newly matriculated into a Master's of Library Science program at Pratt Institute School of Information and Library Science. I was employed as a Librarian Trainee II with the Brooklyn Public Library, posted to the Park Slope Branch, in a then mixed-class neighborhood.

But I had a dark secret. I couldn't write. To be clear: the thought of college essays and research papers nauseated me. How was I going to get through graduate school? I barely made it through my undergraduate classes by creatively providing and producing alternative assessment products (anything except turning in a research paper). I was the master at avoiding addressing my writing anxiety.

Luck, miracle, or fate brought Sharon A. Edwards and Robert W. Maloy, the authors of *Kids Have All the Write Stuff*, to my small branch library. They were on an author tour for the book, and the publisher offered them to us for a parent education program.

Maloy, a University of Massachusetts professor, and Edwards, an elementary school teacher, created a writing program for young children to inspire them to write on their own. Maloy's research had brought him to Edwards's second-grade class as he was researching writing anxiety in college students, high school students, and younger students on down to elementary-aged children.

Maloy concluded that writing anxiety began at almost the beginning of learning to write in a classroom setting. The pressures of forming the letters on the page, acquiring fine motor skills and emergent literacy skills, and learning to spell all led to rampant perfectionism and paralysis. The consequence was a lifelong inability to put words on a page to communicate ideas.

To encourage writing as an enjoyable activity, Edwards and Maloy provided one "writing box"—filled with materials such as pencils, pens, markers, and paper—to each child in Edwards's class. The children then brought the writing boxes home, with no restrictions.

The children could use as many or as few of the materials as they wanted, as well as write what they wanted, when they wanted, and how they wanted. This experiment succeeded beyond the authors' wildest hopes.

There was an explosion of writing by the students, who created signs, poems, recipes, maps, cartoons, letters, journals, and handmade books. Reading scores improved. Edwards and Maloy determined that the success of the program lay simply in its having provided an opportunity to write, writing materials, and a nonjudgmental writing space for the children.

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The Writing Box Workshops Eight-Week Program

These suggested workshop topics are in this order as the skills needed build from session to session, with mapmaking being the easiest, moving to the more complicated writing activities.

1. Maps
2. Cartoons
3. Menus and Recipes
4. Hieroglyphics
5. Newspapers and Newsletters, Blogs, Facebook, and Twitter
6. Postcards and Letters
7. Poetry
8. Handmade Books

Each workshop is one hour long. Each suggested program has five common elements:

9. Books related to the topic; we call these mentor texts.
10. Creation of an example by the librarian.
11. Modeling the action of writing.
12. A simple interaction with the children.
13. Twenty to thirty minutes writing time.
14. Five minutes sharing time.
15. Writing boxes that are available for reference checkout during library hours.

Read more about mentor texts at www.teachmentortexts.com/p/what-are-mentor-texts.html#axzz4GcJxej48.

In my library that evening, Edwards and Maloy spoke in very practical terms about literacy, child development, and the reading/writing connection. They encouraged parents to inspire reading and writing by simply giving children materials, a space, and nonjudgmental reflections.[1] As I listened to them describe how to put together writing boxes for school

and home, I wondered if we could replicate this as a public library program. As I thought about the paper that was due in my Services to Children class, I wondered if I could give myself permission to write to please myself, to take off the editor's hat, and to be nonjudgmental while I was writing.

I read and reread their book. My goal was to create a safe creative space for writing in our small branch. I persuaded branch librarian Ann Kalkoff to allow an experiment in the children's room. I created writing boxes filled with supplies.

For paper, I raided the recycling bin next to the copier. I set up writing box workshops for the upcoming summer reading program. The well-stocked writing boxes were available as reference materials, to be signed out from the children's reference desk.

My background in children's literature and in working in children's museums informed my understanding of how to structure a weekly workshop around writing. That summer, I experimented with sessions on cartooning, secret codes, retelling fairy tales, picture-book making, jokes, and recipes.

What Worked

The weekly workshops drew in ten to twenty children, ages five to twelve, on Wednesdays from 10:00 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. as part of our summer reading program. In addition to the materials in the writing boxes, extra supplies were available every afternoon from the reference desk from 2:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m.

Two writing boxes—one for preschoolers and one for elementary children—were available in the children's room to sign out for use in the library. Each contained developmentally appropriate supplies such as rounded safety scissors for the younger set. There was an initial fear that supplies would disappear or be misused. That never happened. We soon also discovered that parents and children enjoyed writing together.

The Asbestos Crisis of 1993

A surprising opportunity to continue the program came when the New York City mayor delayed school openings for eleven days while building workers performed asbestos abatement in more than one hundred schools, including those closest to our branch.[2]

Working parents scrambling for childcare turned to the public libraries as a safe space for their children to be during the day. For the next week or so, we consistently had fifty to sixty children in our branch, happily occupied in reading and writing. This experience confirmed that the workshops and materials were suitable for a diversity of ages and could scale up or down as needed.

We measured the success of the program by the enthusiasm and engagement of the writers and by the number of returning participants. The success inspired us to recruit other branches to participate the next summer, and the program office of the Brooklyn Public Library generously provided materials to any branch that participated.

In the third year of the program, fifty-eight branches engaged in some form of the writing box program. A year later, I presented a workshop at the New York State Library Association Conference to encourage librarians to include writing boxes as part of the New York State Summer Reading Program.

Getting Started

Over the last twenty years, wherever I have been a librarian, there have been writing boxes. I have conducted writing box workshops with librarians and teachers for system-wide trainings for the New York City Department of Education, for Maricopa County libraries in Arizona, at state conferences like that of the Minnesota Library Association, and at the national conference for the American Library Association's Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC). It works.

The Why

No one questions the role of youth services librarians in the promotion of literacy. We develop collections for that purpose. We select the best of the best to surround our readers with high-quality materials. We partner with teachers to support their curriculum with high-interest, age-relevant materials. We have responded to the call to provide summer enrichment programs to stem what has been termed the "summer slide" and prevent a loss of reading and math skills in elementary-aged students.[3] Many public libraries are providing summer learning opportunities beyond reading, including STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) programs and encouraging creativity through maker spaces.[4]

One of the most significant initiatives of ALSC is Every Child Ready to Read @ your library (ECRR). Literacy is the focus of ECRR, which incorporates simple practices based on research to help parents and caregivers develop early literacy skills in children. ECRR helps public libraries have an even greater impact on early literacy through an approach that focuses on educating parents and caregivers.

Teaching the primary adults in a child's life about the importance of early literacy and how to nurture prereading skills at home multiplies the effect of library efforts many times. We would be hard-pressed to find a person who doesn't believe that part of a school's or public library's mission is to support reading fluency or literacy in citizens of all ages.

What isn't so obvious is the reading/writing connection. It is essential that—just as children's librarians are encouraging reading aloud and the sharing of books—we share the joy of writing and communicate how writing is tied to literacy,

particularly since, more than ten years after Edwards's and Maloy's experiences in the classroom, teachers continue to experience students' dismay when faced with writing time.[5]

A More Recent Study

We know that achievement gaps in educational experiences exist for disadvantaged children of all ethnic and racial groups. These children need practice with their attention and fine motor skills, as well as a better understanding of the world around them.[6] We know that the library is the literacy center that welcomes everyone to programs, like storytimes, that feature early literacy skills. I encourage librarians who serve children and young adults to add a component of writing to their literacy programming for all ages.

Reading is decoding the symbols (words constructed of letters of the alphabet) on the page and making meaning from them; writing is creating symbols to communicate meaning. More than once, a preschooler has attended our writing box programs with an older sibling. We simply provide paper taped to the linoleum and two or three large water-soluble markers.

The child creates what we would call scribbles on the page—we perceive random marks. However, if I ask her to tell me what she wrote, the child can point to her symbols and tell me that story. This is the beginning of literacy. She is reading her symbols and communicating to me.[7] A writing box program as part of the public library's summer reading program can increase parent engagement, promote family literacy, and just enhance fun. It is easy to replicate and inexpensive, requires very little prep and no technology, and is relevant to all ages.

A Bill of Writes

This has been adapted from *Kids Have All the Write Stuff,* with permission of the authors. I post this during writing box sessions.

1. I write to please myself.
2. I decide how to use the writing box.
3. I choose what to write and know when it is finished.
4. I am a writer and a reader right now.
5. I have things to say and write every day.
6. I write when I play, and I play when I write.
7. I can write about my experience and my imagination.
8. I spell the way I can and learn to spell as I write.
9. I learn as I write and write as I learn.

Creating Writing Box Programs

While I have been asked about using computers and electronic tablets with writing box programs, I've designed the program deliberately to be low-tech. Low-tech means low cost, accessible, and reproducible.

We ask librarians to create "purposeful programs." A few examples of purposeful writing by young authors are postcards, greeting cards, bookmarks, brochures, menus, ads, personal notes, maps, lists, book recommendations, and newspapers. Even the youngest writers can understand the purpose of these writing formats.

Unlike completing a tedious worksheet, creating this content is an authentic writing experience for the children, the most significant outcome of which is confidence and competency.

At the beginning of each workshop, we ask that the writers engage thoughtfully in a piece of literature or text as a prompt to their writing. As an example, I may begin a workshop session talking about the many kinds of families. My mentor texts

may include Susan Kuklin's *Families*, Todd Parr's *The Family Book*, and John Coy's *Their Great Gift: Courage, Sacrifice, and Hope in a New Land*. I would then read aloud Dan Yaccarino's *All the Way to America: The Story of a Big Italian Family and a Little Shovel*.

On the surface, this is an immigration story. Delving a little deeper, we discover that it is about what gets passed down in families—objects like shovels or pieces of clothing, genetic traits like blue eyes, aptitudes like a talent for singing or drawing. As we reflect on the story, I chart these sorts of things on an easel pad. I may also suggest that we can write about what we hope to pass down to the next generation. (Some children do not have families.) I may mention that I wish to pass down my love of reading or my knowledge about teaching.

It is important to recognize that as librarians we are not imitating "school" practice. During summer reading programs, we are not teaching children to read, and during writing box programs, we are not teaching children to write. We know that self-selection of materials is a key component for readers who are choosing to read. Similarly, we are facilitating writing as a self-selected activity.

Who are these programs for? The structured programs are for ages six through fourteen. Any writing box program can be adapted to meet a range of ages—early elementary (first through third grade), middle elementary (third through fifth grade), or middle school (fifth through eighth grade).

One of the essential components of a successful writing box program is the mentor text. Mentor texts are books or materials that model writing for our writers. Our writers can use these books as inspiration: "I want to do a map like that!" "I LOVE *Baby Mouse*. I am going to write a story about yesterday in gym class, but they are going to be kittens instead of mice."

It is likely that many of the mentor texts suggested (see "Further Reading") are already in your library. Planning a writing box program is a terrific excuse to refresh your collections in these subject areas.

Finding a Good Space

It seems self-evident, but the first thing to do is to find a good space for writing. The children's room is fine. Tables and chairs are great but not essential. My school library had soft, moveable furniture and wooden stools and benches. We did all of our writing on clipboards. Children wrote sitting up, lying down—wherever they were most comfortable.

Even though libraries are not the shushing quiet spaces of yesteryear, it is good to remember that writing is a noisy business. When children and young adults are excited about their work, they are not quiet. Find a room or a space where noisy activity would not be disturbing to others.

Creating a Nonjudgmental Space

Here are some tips for creating an appropriate and comfortable space for writing.

- Stand back while writers are writing.
- Refrain from comparing or complimenting: "I really like that." "Isn't Marly's cartoon cute? Everyone look at Marly's cartoon." These observations foster competition and comparison. Each child's work is unique, and it is freeing to know their work is not being judged.
- Address the writer who wishes to share with an open question: "What would you like to tell me about your work?" "Would you like to read to me what you wrote?"
- Set the room up with books, placed face out, on the related topic.
- Model the writing activity and verbalize why you are doing it: "I am drawing a map. Here is my house. I am writing 'my house.' I am listing who lives in the house. What is across the street? The firehouse is across the street. I am writing 'Firehouse.'"
- Encourage adults to join in—not to observe, but to participate. You might say, "Mrs. Fox, is there anyone that you would like to send a letter to?"
- Encourage older children to help the younger ones at their table, but keep in mind that they should also have their own writing experience.
- Have a dictionary or online spelling resource available, but encourage the children not to worry about spelling, and don't let them get bogged down by it. Remind them that we are writing, not editing.
- In the writing box program, there is no place for awards, ribbons, or prizes. The process *is* the product.

Who Should Participate?

I welcomed anyone who wished to write to participate. This meant moms and dads, caregivers and babysitters, sisters and brothers, teachers and grad students—whoever was interested. The writing box program was initially designed for the school-aged child, but we discovered that there was no reason to limit attendance by age.

Younger preschool siblings can write while kneeling at a table or sitting on the floor with paper taped down in front of them. Sitters can write postcards home while babies are asleep in carriages. Grandfathers have discovered their own artistic and writing talent while creating comic memoirs.

Separating and Supporting the Grown-ups

The writing box program was not a drop-off program. All children ages eight and younger were required to have an adult in the room or nearby (within sight). We encouraged adults to actively participate and to create their own writing piece. Sometimes this meant separating the adult from the child if the adult got too involved with their child's writing, such as making critical comments while the child is writing. Encourage the adults to focus on their own work, and remind them that there will be time for editing later.

Reserve the last five minutes of the program time for sharing. Do not insist on a public group time. Simply walk around and ask a child one-on-one to describe their work. *What did you write? Who is this for? Would you like to read it to me?* I have found that an adult shining a light on children's writing creates an opportunity for them to see for themselves the connection between reading and writing.

References

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2. Sam Dillon, "Asbestos in the Schools: Disorder on Day 1 in New York Schools," *New York Times*, September 21, 1993, www.nytimes.com/1993/09/21/us/asbestos-in-the-schools-disorder-on-day-1-in-new-york-schools.html?pagewanted=all.
3. Susan Roman and Carole D. Fiore, "Do Public Library Summer Reading Programs Close the Achievement Gap?" *Children and Libraries* 8, no. 3 (2010): 27–31.
4. Heather Michele Moorefield-Lang, "Makers in the Library: Case Studies of 3D Printers and Maker Spaces in Library Settings," *Library Hi Tech* 32, no. 4 (2014): 583–93.
5. Kelli R. Paquette, "Encouraging Primary Students' Writing through Children's Literature," *Early Childhood Education Journal* 35, no. 2 (2007): 155–65.
6. David Grissmer, Kevin J. Grimm, Sophie M. Aiyer, William M. Murrah, and Joel S. Steele, "Fine Motor Skills and Early Comprehension of the World: Two New School Readiness Indicators," *Developmental Psychology* 46, no. 5 (2010): 1008–17.
7. Joan Brooks McLane and Gillian Dowley McNamee, "Beginnings of Literacy," *Zero to Three Journal* 12, no. 1 (September 1991): www.zerotothree.org/resources/1056-beginnings-of-literacy.

Further Reading

The following is a suggested list of mentor texts.

Coy, John. *Their Great Gift: Courage, Sacrifice, and Hope in a New Land*. Photographs by Wing Young Huie. Minneapolis: Lerner, 2016.

González, Xelena. *All Around Us. Illustrated by Adriana M. Garcia*. El Paso, TX: Cinco Puntos Press, 2017.

Howard, Elizabeth Fitzgerald. *Aunt Flossie's Hats (and Crab Cakes Later)*. Illustrated by James Ransome. New York: Clarion, 1991.

Kuklin, Susan. *Families*. New York: Hyperion, 2006.

Lin, Grace. *Dim Sum For Everyone*. New York: Random House, 2001.

Parr, Todd. *The Family Book*. New York: Little, Brown, 2010.

Phi, Bao. *A Different Pond*. Illustrated by Thi Bui. Mankato, MN: Capstone Young Readers, 2017.

Wong, Janet S. *Apple Pie Fourth of July*. Illustrated by Margaret Chodos. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002.

Yaccarino, Dan. *All the Way to America: The Story of a Big Italian Family and a Little Shovel*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011.