

Writer's Workshop: Maintaining social connection in remote learning

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Questions to Consider:

- How can you customize writing instruction for online delivery while meeting grade-level standards?
- How can you integrate socio-emotional learning components to maximize engagement and create a sense of community?
- Which virtual platforms and digital tools would work best for our students, teachers, and parents?
- Do students at your school have access to a device and the internet? Consider sending out a survey to identify the needs of your school population.

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic brought great changes to classrooms and students around the world. As the virus swept into cities and communities, students were swept out of their routines—experiencing many sudden and profound losses. In one urban school district in the United States, elementary students lost the writing communities they had spent the previous seven months fostering through a face-to-face Writer's Workshop.

As a literacy coach, the first author, Brandi Nunnery, worried about students losing the important momentum they had developed as writers during the year. She began considering how she could use technology to maintain the important relationships her students had cultivated as writers. Tapping into the potential of Zoom to create virtual spaces where users can connect, Brandi decided to create an online Writer's Workshop.

With careful planning and intention matched with powerful teaching practices, any learning environment (whether in person or online) can be interesting and engaging. The online workshop described in this article was grounded in the powerful practice, the rituals and routines, of Writer's Workshop.

The Set Up: Creating a Secure and Safe Online Space

Students were first recruited through a direct email to parents, asking those who were interested to register using a Google form. In total, 150 students registered for the first unit, which began on March 23, 2020. The students who registered accurately represented a sample of the population of the elementary school, which serves students with the following racial breakdown: 51.6% White, 23.5% Hispanic, 15.4% Asian, 6.8% African American, 2.1% two or more races, 0.4% American Indian, and 0.2% Pacific Islander. Approximately 40% of the students in the school receive free and reduced-price lunch, and 25% are multilingual learners.

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The shift from face-to-face instruction to online instruction was jarring and created barriers for students in this community. While the school district provided each child with a Chromebook and made efforts to broaden Internet access, some students still lacked access and fell victim to the country’s unpreparedness for such a dramatic shutdown of schools. This nationwide issue must be resolved to ensure access, equity, and fairness to all students.

The Online Community: Creating a Virtual Community

Everyone’s world had been turned upside down, and Brandi knew the importance of creating a space that was safe and caring, while also engaging and informative. The students were told from the beginning that the Writer Workshop time was not school; rather, it was a “writing community” where writers of all ages would work together, learning from and growing alongside each other.

A Facebook group included both teachers and students, and weekly posts were sent to parents each week. This allowed the online writing community to stay connected through social media without learning a brand-new platform.

The students met on Zoom Monday-Friday from 10:30-11:30 a.m. A standing Zoom meeting each day allowed access via the same link and password each time. In an online environment, these little consistencies can be the key to whether the student gets logged on to the meeting. With parent permission, each of these meetings were recorded daily and

placed in a Google drive folder. This allowed for those who had to miss a meeting or who had inconsistent access to the Internet to still access the content of the meeting.

With the large number of students, breakout rooms were used for community building. Birthdays were celebrated by making posters and showing them on the screen. One writer, Chase (pseudonym), was bravely battling leukemia during this time. The writing community wore t-shirts and had a “Cheer for Chase” day to encourage him to keep fighting. In order for the writers to continue to connect and get to know each other, Brandi also offered a 15-minute monitored chat time at the end of every session. Students loved chatting with their writing friends.

In addition to three teachers and another literacy coach who supported the daily workshop, 5th- and 6th-graders served as breakout room leaders. This provided leadership opportunities for upper elementary students, while creating community among the different ages within the workshop. Periodic training sessions were held for these leaders to ensure they understood how to share their screen, access student writing, and encourage feedback.

The online environment offered possibilities not present during in-class experiences, including opportunities for younger students to learn from older, more experienced writers and opportunities for older, more experienced students to engage in leadership efforts with their younger counterparts.



Figure 1
The online Writer’s Workshop structure

Figure 2
Reflection prompts used throughout the online Writer’s Workshop

REFLECT			
Looking Back	Looking Forward	Looking Inward	Looking Outward
What did you end up doing as a writer today?	In what ways do you hope to improve as a writer?	How do you feel about the work you did today as a writer? What do you like? Dislike? Why?	Who has influenced you as a writer?
Looking back, how did you spend your time today as a writer?	What's one thing you want to improve in your writing today?	How did writing make you feel today?	How do you think your writing is different from the way other people write?
What struggles did you have today as a writer? What successes?	When you start writing tomorrow, what's one thing you might change in your piece?	How did you feel about the process today?	If you were the teacher, what would you write on a sticky note and leave on your piece of writing?
Looking back across the (year, unit, month), what have you noticed about yourself as a writer?	In what ways do you want to grow as a writer?	What did you learn about yourself as a writer today?	What is a word (phrase, line, section, paragraph) you think others will really notice when they read this piece of writing?
Who helped you today? How did that person help you?	What are your plans for the rest of this unit?	What did you learn about yourself as a person from writing today?	According to your self-assessment, in what ways are you meeting the standards (or checklist)? In what ways can you improve?
	What are your strengths as a writer that you plan to carry forward into future pieces?	What does your writing topic reveal about you as a writer?	
	What's a goal you would like to set for yourself for next time?	How are you changing as a writer this year?	In what ways have mentor authors supported you as a writer?

Source
Brian Kessel's *When Writers Drive the Workshop*

The Structure: Teaching Writer's Workshop in an Online Space

In the face-to-face Writer's Workshop, the traditional structure was used to cultivate a classroom of writers. The class began with a mini-lesson, which included a moment to connect to previous lessons, time to teach via demonstration or explicit instruction, an opportunity for students to engage in active development with their own work or with peers, and a moment to link their new knowledge to future lessons. Following the mini-lesson, the teacher conferred with students to provide specific feedback to move their writers forward via response. After a lengthy chunk of time for students to write, they came back together to share their writing in the Author's Chair. The workshop ended with a brief time to reflect on their learning.

The online workshop mirrored the structure used in the face-to-face classroom with a few deviations (Figure 1). The consistency allows for seamlessly moving in and out of virtual and face-to-face learning.

Part 1: Reflection

While daily reflection was not part of the workshop at the beginning, Brandi quickly realized that any chance for students to think and share would further enhance the writing community. Brandi used reflection prompts (Figure 2) that asked writers to Look Forward, Look Backward, Look Inward, or Look Outward to steer student thinking toward where they had been as writers and where they might go next in their writing.

In one reflection session, the students were asked the question, "How do you think your writing is different from the way other people write?" One student who volunteered to share likened her own writing to the paintings of Bob Ross. She stated that writing can put her in a Zen-like state, just like you

feel when you watch a Bob Ross-directed painting. Then she said she wanted her writing to "live on" just like Bob Ross' paintings.

Part 2: Mini-Lesson

During the online Writer's Workshop, the mini-lesson began directly after the reflection and focused on one part of the writing process: brainstorming, drafting, revision, editing, or publishing. Similar to the face-to-face Writer's Workshop, the mini-lesson was brief and lasted about 10-15 minutes. Each session's mini-lesson included the components of connection, teaching point, active engagement, and a link.

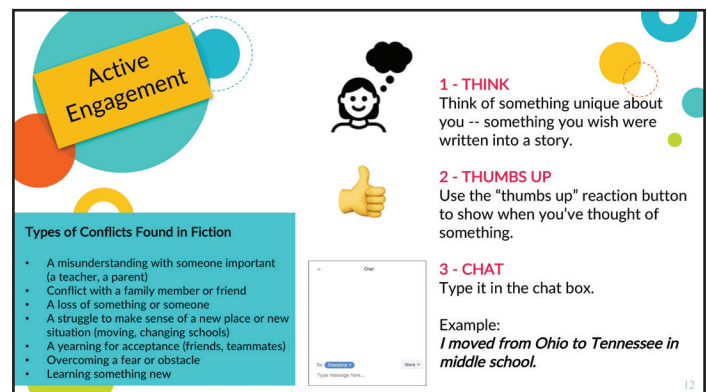
The connection explained how this particular mini-lesson fit within the work the writers had already been doing. Then, one specific teaching point (usually a new technique) was introduced for the students to try out as writers that day. In the next stage, the mini-lesson transitioned into active engagement, where students either gave Brandi suggestions for trying the technique or rehearsed the technique with the online group or with someone at home. Lastly, the mini-lesson closed with a link connecting the writing lives of the community to the writing goals of the day's session.

Due to the demands on parents at home during the pandemic, opportunities for engagement during the workshop were even more important. When students needed to talk through writing plans or orally rehearse stories, two options were available: 1) Turn & Talk with an adult or child and 2) On Your Own reflection time (Figure 3). In addition to rehearsal and planning, these protocols kept students active and encouraged them to get up, move, and talk. Students were also able to use a chat box protocol called "Think, Thumbs Up, Chat" (Figure 4) to participate in discussions. Students used the "thumbs up" reaction button, then shared their thoughts in the chat box.



Figure 4
Think, Thumbs Up, Chat engagement protocol

Figure 3
Turn and Talk or On Your Own engagement protocol



Part 3: Writing

Writing time was the most prioritized part of each session, with 25 to 30 minutes devoted to writing and conferring. Brandi played instrumental music during writing time and reminded students that they could mute the sound if they found it distracting. A “Writing Time” slide was created and displayed during the entire writing time (Figure 5) to provide writers with tips if they were stuck or felt finished.

Part 4: Author’s Chair

The last 10 minutes of each session was used for sharing writing. Initially, volunteers were asked to share a certain part of their writing that targeted the mini-lesson strategy or skill in the large group. Over time, Brandi used breakout rooms so that student and teacher leaders could provide more opportunities for writers to share their work. With many leaders on hand, Brandi was able to bounce between rooms to troubleshoot and offer support.

The Online Units of Study

From March until June, Brandi taught three genres that each lasted approximately four weeks. She began with a unit of Fairy Tales in March, moved to Informational News Articles in April, and finished the school year with Realistic Fiction. The first unit immersed students in the genre of fairy tales using YouTube videos and other free online fairy tale stories that students could read on their own or with their families (see Table 1). In the Informational News Articles unit, the community launched Kids News Network with Brandi serving as “show producer” while the student “journalists” created

a special segment on “Adaptations Around the World” (see Table 2). School officially ended in May, but the students remained eager to write and so Brandi continued the workshop with a Realistic Fiction unit. This unit layered writing skills from previous units and allowed Brandi to keep the content relatively light as the group moved into the summer months (see Table 3).

Benefits of an Online Writer’s Workshop

Despite its challenges, the online Writer’s Workshop had tremendous benefits. These benefits include the ability to differentiate the experience for children, the opportunity for parents to become more involved in the teaching/learning process, and a sense of community and togetherness within a digital space that can often feel isolating.

Differentiation

One significant benefit of the online Writer’s Workshop was the ability for children across multiple grade levels to learn from one another. This uniquely diverse group of writers represented a variety of ages and writing experience. Differentiation was key to helping each writer grow individually during the workshop. Brandi provided resources for parents and students prior to, during, and after the workshop. These resources included grade level-targeted rubrics and checklists housed in the Google drive folders of the students. Targeted lessons addressed parts of the checklists during revision sessions. Brandi used the PowerPoint slides once again to focus each child on the goal for their writing (see Figure 6).

WRITING TIME

Plan the sections of your article.

- Choose one of your sections and put the main idea of that section in a box.
- Next, read over your notes from that section and see if you can bullet the smaller ideas about that section, below the box. When you're done with one section, plan another one.
- You should have 3-5 sections. You should have 3-5 bullets per section.

What if I feel stuck?

- Reread the notes you've taken so far. Think, "What does my reader need to know?" You may need to add more things to research.
- Move on to a different section and come back to this one later.

What if I'm done?

- Do you have 3-5 sections for your article? Do you have 3-5 bullets per section? You may need to do more research.
- Start drafting your article.

Search Engines for Student Writers

Kiddle.co
Kidrex.org
Wackysafe.com

25:00

Conferencing with the KNN Producer:

You may ask only **TWO** questions today.

What are Single Use Plastics?

- Definition of Single Use Plastics (SUP)
- Examples of SUP
 - Bottles: water, soda, milk
 - Bags: trash, ziploc
 - Drinking items: cups, straws
- Statistics about SUP*
 - American use of SUP
 - Amount of SUP in trash overall

**save statistics on SUP in oceans for those sections.

Figure 5
Writing Time

Figure 6
Revision Checklist

Narrative Writing Checklists: Endings	
2nd Grade	I chose the action, talk, or feeling that would make a good ending.
3rd Grade	I chose the action, talk, or feeling that would make a good ending and worked to write it well.
4th Grade	I wrote an ending that connected to the beginning or the middle of the story. I used action, dialogue, or feeling to bring my story to a close.
5th Grade	I wrote an ending that connected to the main part of the story. The character said, did, or realized something at the end that came from what happened in the story.
6th Grade	I wrote an ending that connected to what the story was really about. I gave readers a sense of closure by showing a new realization or insight or a change in a character or narrator.

Table 1. Fairy Tale Unit of Study Mini-lessons and Student Samples

Fairy Tale Unit of Study

Culminating Writing Goal: Write and publish an adapted fairy tale inspired by a classic.

Sample Mini-Lesson Teaching Point	Summary	Student Application of Mini-Lesson
Know the classic story and tell it often. Make a change to that story. Make the change lead to other changes.	A 4th-grader is inspired by classic fairy tale <i>Goldilocks</i> . Her character Lily is in Memphis and enters the home of Elvis Presley.	. . . While taking a stroll in an unknown street in Memphis, Lily spotted this gorgeous mansion on the hilltop. The mansion was as big as a mountain. It was stunning. Lily knew she shouldn't go in people's houses, but it was so gorgeous she could not resist going in. Lily walked into the gateway and went up the steps to the porch and carefully reached the door. The door was slightly open, and she could hear a beautiful music playing inside. Lily opened the door and went in.
Fairy tales have a magic formula: A character wants something. Then there is trouble, and MORE trouble. Finally, there is a resolution.	A 4th-grader is inspired by classic fairy tale <i>Jack and the Beanstalk</i> . The character Eli wants more money to help his family. This want ends up causing lots of action and trouble before resolving.	Once upon a time, there was a boy named Eli. He was poor, and lived with his mother and sister in a dirty old barn in the middle of nowhere. Eli was 11 years old, and had clothes layered with dirt. He had mud like skin, and dark blue eyes like the color of the sky at midnight. All Eli wanted was his life to improve, and he knew that all he needed was money.
Balance dialogue with character actions.	A 2nd-grader is inspired by classic fairy tale <i>The Three Billy Goats Gruff</i> . The writer uses a dialogue sentence immediately followed by an action sentence.	. . . a mean hunter. The medium duck was scared but had an eureka moment. So, he yelled "Come and get me feather brain meany pants." The big duck flapped his wings and flew over the cage. The hunter tried to grab him but fell in the cage. The big duck flew cage and quickly locked the door.

Table 2. News Article Unit of Study Mini-Lessons and Student Samples

News Articles Unit of Study

Culminating Writing Goal: Publish a news article and video recording "report" for the Kids News Network.


Sample Mini-Lesson Teaching Point	Summary	Student Application of Mini-Lesson
News article writers write captivating introductions.	A 4th-grader writes a catchy introduction for her article on how humans are affected by natural disasters.	Imagine a giant wave crashing into your only home. Or, your house getting burned down in a wildfire and there's nothing you can do to stop it. Natural disasters can cause unimaginable destruction.
Writers use technical, academic words or phrases to add authenticity to their work.	A 3rd-grader defines the technical term "controlled burns" in his article about forest fires, using phrases such as "slow-burning fires" in the definition.	Humans have found ways to adapt to living with the threat of wildfires. One way is . . . Controlled Burns: A controlled burn is a wildfire that Forest Managers set intentionally for a specific purpose. They start slow-burning fires to burn up plant debris & dead trees before a fire starts. This helps clear fuel and makes room for new life to grow.
Writers include text features and photo journalism to highlight important information.	A 1st-grader adds a sidebar text feature that highlights the problem of deforestation for his Trees Save the World article.	 <p>Did you know?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 million trees are cut down per day around the world. • 15 billion trees are cut down per year.

Table 3. News Article Unit of Study Mini-Lessons and Student Samples

Realistic Fiction Unit of Study

Culminating Writing Goal: Write and publish an elaborated realistic fiction story that focuses on an important message.

Sample Mini-Lesson Teaching Point	Summary	Student Application of Mini-Lesson
Writers develop characters by showing their motivations and struggles through each scene.	A 3rd-grader writes about the struggles of learning to ride a two-wheeler bike for the first time.	<p>Sweat was falling down my forehead. I thought, “Am I going to make it??”</p> <p>I had low confidence because I fell over and over again. I said, “A warrior always has defeat!”</p> <p>Next day my dad held the back of my seat and I was successfully riding with my dad’s hands on the back but I had to ride it by myself.</p> <p>I was still riding till the afternoon and my dad’s arm hurt so, he took it off. I have been crashing ever since. Then, cars become a big problem because they kept looking like they were going to hit me “BIG DEVILS!!” That somehow affected me and I crashed recklessly. I said, “I’m going to sleep Dad I don’t think I could do this.”</p>
Writers use revealing dialogue to craft characters and move story forward.	A 4th-grader uses complex dialogue between two characters who seem to have a conflict at first, but end up laughing in camaraderie.	<p>“Ah!” Livi cried as the twig broke. Maddie panicked. “Quick, Livi! Put your left foot here . . . yeah, that’s right . . . and your right foot here . . . yeah, there – NONONONO put your left hand there, not there . . . yeah. . .” This continued until a super sweaty Livi was sitting right across from Maddie. “Fewf. That was rough!” Livi said, studying a new scrape on her arm, which was currently a little red.</p> <p>“Well honestly, I told you that it was simple.” Maddie said, check her claw-like nails.</p> <p>Livi grunted. “That was not simple. Not one bit.” She looked at Maddie. Maddie looked at her. Both girls suddenly exploded in fits of giggles. The giggles turned into laughter. Livi and Maddie laughed and laughed and laughed until they cried. “That-harumph-was-snark-hilarious-haha-for some reason!!” Livi managed to get out. “OK, OK. We need to stop.” Maddie said, huffing.</p>
Writers craft endings related to a story’s real message or heart and resolve the struggle.	A 4th-grader subtly resolves the conflict and fear the character is experiencing when moving houses.	CHAPTER TEN – their mom was there the next day, along with the moving truck. Parcel and Package Pickup, the truck’s company helped move their stuff in the house. Cardboard boxes were being hauled inside, one after the other. The house looked much more house-y when the whole family opened all the boxes and began to put things on shelves.

Feedback From Parents

The feedback from parents regarding the Writer's Workshop was overwhelmingly positive. One parent stated, "We have enjoyed the routine and time spent together on Writer's Workshop. During this time when things feel so uncertain, it's nice to have this consistency."

We were pleasantly surprised when some parents chose to learn alongside their children. One particularly moving comment came from a multilingual parent. She stated, "Hey, Ms. Nunnery, I must say you are doing a great job with all the kids. I can see improvement in my kid and me too learning a lot. Since English is not our 1st language, I must say I'm learning a lot from you. I like to sit beside Alaya and attend Writer's Workshop."

Remote Learning Community

Social isolation and loneliness has become a serious health concern for students and families during remote learning. The online Writer's Workshop connected students through its consistent meeting times with embedded, intentional collaboration. The workshop also created a sense of community as students worked together toward common writing goals, shared in the same learning process, and celebrated each other's journeys.

Conclusion

In the midst of a global pandemic, 100 students and one literacy coach created a committed and caring virtual writing community. During a time of great uncertainty, this writing community counted on the consistency and connection that comes with writing and sharing daily with classmates. Using a Writer's Workshop framework, Brandi leaned heavily on the transferability of these tried and true practices to online application. Writer's Workshop offers an opportunity to stay

socially connected—a connection teachers and learners need more than ever.

What Now? Action Steps for an Online Writer's Workshop

1. Identify virtual platform(s) and digital tools that will work best for your teachers, students, and parents. Be sure they are district-approved.
2. Employ security features to keep students and student writing safe and secure.
3. Using Google drive (or a similar platform), establish a registration form and folders for each student.
4. Start with writing units that are highly engaging yet easy to teach. Everyone will be in a new learning environment, so you don't want the content to overburden the writing process in an online format.
5. Begin at the end! Determine the final publication product (for example, a personal narrative piece of writing). Establish a rubric or checklist that will evaluate the final product. Set a date for the final publication.
6. Working back from the final publication date, use a calendar to map out a series of mini-lessons to meet the criteria of the final publication.

Extra Resources:

- Oakland Schools Literacy: ELA Common-Core Aligned Units for Writing <https://www.oaklandschoolsliteracy.org/resources/common-core-resources/ccss-curriculum/>
- Reading and Writing Project Resources: <https://readingandwritingproject.org/resources>
- Heinemann Blog and Podcast featuring Katie Wood Ray, Katherine Bomer, and Corinne Arens: <https://blog.heinemann.com/podcast-writingworkshop-essentials-katiewood-ray-katherine-bomerand-corinne-arens>