

Teaching and Supporting Writing and Close Reading in the Classroom

INTRODUCTION

"Reading makes us better writers. Conversely, let us not forget that the opposite is also true: Writing makes us better readers." – Kelly Gallagher, M.Ed.

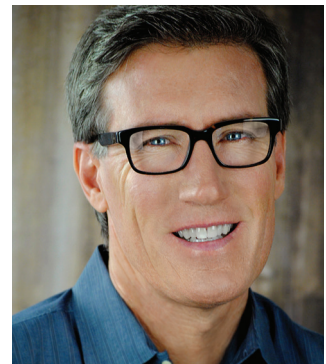
Literacy skills that include a solid foundation in reading and writing are critical to future academic and career pursuits. Indeed, writing skills, along with reading comprehension, serve as predictors of future academic successes and opportunities for significant participation in the global economy (Graham & Perin, 2007). The ability to write well develops careful thinking and serves as a cornerstone for producing literate human beings capable of pursuing meaningful endeavors. While students leaving our educational system may have passed the required literacy tests, many of them lack the cultural literacy needed to be productive citizens in a 21st century society. If we want to make sure that our students are given every opportunity to excel in literacy, the way in which both writing and reading are taught, and the tools available to teachers, must be addressed.

An educational system that values the development of test-takers more than the development of lifelong readers and writers, where students are not given the opportunity for authentic reading and writing experiences, is likely to produce students that see these skills as meaningless chores. If reading and writing become a chore then the very desires we seek to nourish will effectively be obliterated (Gallagher, 2015). Learners that don't want to read and write won't actively pursue the experiences they need to get better at reading and writing, and yet this is exactly what we need student to do if they're to succeed in the 21st century.

WHY IS LITERACY IMPORTANT?

The ability to write well has become a keystone for finding meaningful employment across much of the workforce (Gallagher, 2011). Prospective employees who are unable to write and communicate are not likely to get hired, or they are unlikely to get promotions if they are already working. In sectors like financial services, insurance, and real estate, along with corporations showing the greatest potential for growth, writing skills are

NOTE: This paper features the work and philosophy of Savvas Author, Kelly Gallagher.



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assessed during hiring and play a role in determining who will get the job or who will not. Even amongst positions that pay hourly rates, like those in the fast-growing services sector, one-third to one-fifth of employees have some writing responsibilities (National Commission on Writing, 2004).

HOW DO WE PROMOTE LITERACY?

If young writers are going to develop the skills they need to excel in their academic pursuits and contribute positively in the global economy, then they need to develop writing skills that move beyond limited writing experiences and into writing experiences that can be applied in the real world where they're going. Students need to understand why writing is important so that their writing work carries purpose beyond writing because they "have to" do it for the sake of grades or school requirements (Gallagher, 2011). Students need resources and instruction that allow them to take ownership of their work and give them opportunities to practice and apply their literacy skills in real-world contexts where they can see the value of what they're learning. In order for any kind of curriculum and instruction to impact this learning process it's essential that students have time to read and write.

According to the National Commission on Writing, 97% of elementary school students are writing less than three hours a week, and 40% of twelfth graders report that they are "never" or "hardly ever" assigned a paper of three pages or more in length. If literacy skills are so critical to future success, both in and out of the classroom, how do we integrate teaching practices and resources that create lifelong readers with exemplary writing skills if we are not making time for reading and writing? In order to develop competent writers students must be given a chance to learn through real world writing, with a teacher who models the writing process, utilizes real world mentor texts for students to emulate, and gives students the necessary time it takes to allow them to grow as writers, regardless of their starting point or primary language (Gallagher, 2015). In order to do this, teachers must have access to next-generation resources that engage and challenge both themselves and their students.

Kelly Gallagher, a 30-plus year veteran educator, former co-director of the South Basin Writing Project, asserts that good writing stems from fulfilling the following student needs (Gallagher, 2006):

“In order to develop competent writers students must be given a chance to learn through real world writing.”

1. More writing practice.
2. Teacher models good writing.
3. Ample opportunities to read and study other writers.
4. Choices when it comes to writing topics.
5. Opportunities to write for authentic purposes and audiences.
6. Meaningful feedback from both teacher and peers.

Students require structure and opportunities that address these needs by promoting meaning, inspiring thoughtful conversation and debate, and allowing students to collaborate and share ideas. Teachers need opportunities for modeling, monitoring, and providing feedback in order to meet and challenge students wherever they are on the literacy path. Educators need to incorporate instruction, resources, and technology that enable students' to develop to their full potential and promote learning habits that help them become lifelong readers and writers.

ABUNDANT WRITING OPPORTUNITIES

If we expect students to write well, they need plenty of opportunities to practice. That is, they need to write *a lot* (Murray, 2004). Volume matters. Writing every day helps students draw on relevant knowledge and experience in preparation for new activities. This, in turn, increases their ability to tackle written assignments with confidence. Daily writing opportunities give students the practice they need to become more proficient at consolidating and reviewing ideas and experiences so they can reformulate and extend knowledge when expressing themselves through writing (Langer, 2002). In addition, if we require that students be adept at writing under pressure so they can pass important assessments, score well on entrance exams, get

accepted to college, and succeed in finding meaningful employment, we need to give them time to practice doing so. If the opportunity to actually write isn't present, there is little hope that students will magically acquire the writing skills they're being taught. This is especially true of ELLs and below-level learners who need to be encouraged to write as much, if not more, than their on-level peers (Gallagher, 2006).

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Writing is a vital 21st century skill that integrates thinking, meaning, language, and expression. Writing activities should include:

- **Write to Learn** opportunities that help students organize their thoughts, build content knowledge, connect ideas about the text, and deepen their understanding. Students have the opportunity to explore what they know, and do not know, through writing.
- **Writing to Sources** opportunities that prompt students to draw evidence from the text and cite textual evidence to prove their points.
- **Writing Process** opportunities that provide explicit instruction on the different writing modes (argument, explanatory, and informational).
- **Writing for Assessment** opportunities that help prepare students for high stakes and timed writing. These writing pieces can also become the basis for building a student's writing portfolio throughout the course of the year and provide reflection and evaluation of growth.

TEACHER-LED MODELING

For writing instruction to be effective teachers need to make sure that writing is something that's being taught rather than assigned (Gallagher, 2011).

“We are English teachers not English assigners, and as such, we are paid to get in our classroom and present texts that stretch our students' thinking. It is our job to work our students through text that is a little bit too hard for them. It's not difficult novels that are the problem; it's how they are taught that is the problem.”

- Kelly Gallagher

This includes the associated reading strategies that help students comprehend, engage, and process various texts. As the best readers and writers in the class, teachers must model expert reading and writing every step of the way. Modeling that includes the teacher writing and thinking out loud in front of the class helps students successfully draft their own pieces and provides a foundation for what and how to write (Gallagher, 2006). Similarly students should also be given a “guided tour” when starting a new book or academic reading selection. Specifically, if we want students to have positive reading experience they need the kind of thoughtful modeling and introductions that include the following (Gallagher & Allington, 2009):

1. Frame the text before students begin reading.
2. Provide a specific purpose for reading each chapter.
3. Design close reading opportunities that allow students to dig deeper than surface level reading.
4. Model to students how the text should be read.
5. Craft related lessons that give students time to discuss and write about their ideas and their confusions, both in small-group and whole class settings.

This type of modeling and framing provides a foundation so students are able to move forward in enriching ways whether in small group settings or independently. Finding a balance between teaching in a way that sets up a framework without over teaching, but doesn't leave students out in the cold on their own, is the key to instruction that manifests a positive and worthwhile reading experience. Teachers as mature readers know things that their students do not and good modeling and framing practices allow them to take advantage of their expertise (Gallagher & Allington, 2009).

VARIETY OF TEXT SOURCES

Literacy programs that provide ample opportunities for students to study and read the work of other writers and explore various types of writing, including longer texts and stories, help them establish the broader knowledge base needed to excel in literacy (Hirsch, 2006). In fact, Kelly Gallagher indicates in his recent book, *Readicide*, that, “flooding students with access to reading material,” is one of the most important things he’s done to increase literacy. Exposure to relevant literature in a variety of genres, cultures and perspectives helps students achieve reading “flow” regardless of what they’re reading, especially when reading is structured in a way that allows them to sharpen their analytical skills (Gallagher & Allington, 2009). Teachers must be prepared to challenge all students with difficult text, recognize the difference between liking a text and gleaning value from it, and be aware of the danger when developing minds are not stretched by longer, challenging works (Gallagher & Allington, 2009).

A blend of both academic and recreational reading is necessary to balance instruction that supports good reading habits with the joy of reading for reading’s sake. Providing a variety of mentor texts helps students see how other writers compose and allows them to make the connection between understanding what the text says and comprehending how it’s constructed so they can apply the strategies in their own writing (Gallagher, 2011). If the expectation is that writers are able to compose compelling arguments, engaging narratives, or fascinating explanatory pieces, then students need to experience and engage with these types of writing (Gallagher, 2015). If we want students to cultivate an authentic appreciation for reading we also need to provide them with the balance recreational reading brings.

Reading and writing instruction in the classroom should cultivate both technical proficiency as well as love of learning. Students should have access to a wide range of interesting reading materials including:

- **Connected & Relevant Literature** texts that encompass diverse genres, including multimedia that spans various time periods, cultures, and perspectives that connect the unique lives of students to the world.
- **Close Reading**—complex text, and instruction, and strategies that motivate students to read different texts thoughtfully and apply strategies for critically examining the text opportunities and instruction.

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- **Literacy Development** strategies and instruction to help students understand texts and apply knowledge so that they become confident learners. Integrated literacy instruction and strategies help students make meaning of texts, develop language skills, express themselves effectively, and build content knowledge.
- **Integration of Trade Books** or novels that engage students and can be classic or contemporary to extend learning beyond the classroom so students are reading and exploring longer pieces of literature that build content knowledge, connect students to different experiences, and help students apply their learning.

STUDENT DIRECTED LEARNING

Students need choices when it comes to reading and writing topics if we want them to stay engaged. Choices related to reading materials and writing topics help students take ownership and delight in the learning they do. When students are faced with over teaching, and more specifically over analyzing, their love of literacy is likely to diminish. This kind of instruction, with little room for student choice, creates a learning experience that values the trivial at the expense of the meaningful. The small details become the focus, rather than the *big ideas* that lead to meaningful questions and associated learning (Gallagher & Allington, 2009). Gallagher suggests that we can give power back to students by helping them “find their own big ideas and support them by building in talk opportunities.”

If we want students to engage and take part in their literacy learning they also need to know what’s expected of them. Similarly they need opportunities to evaluate and reflect on their own work. When students are clear

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that they will be evaluated based on their performance, they can more readily identify current progress, celebrate their strengths, and target areas for improvement. One way to do this is to have students keep a portfolio of the writing that they have completed. Indeed, Gallagher suggests a great way to do this is to have students build a writers portfolio that includes a reflective letter at the end of the year to help them evaluate their own work.

AUTHENTIC, REAL WORLD CONNECTIONS

Making connections to real world experiences adds value to what students are doing. Connecting to real world texts and experiencing reading materials from a number of different sources in order to make meaning and develop language skills is critical for building knowledge (Wolf, 2007). Teachers can support this aspect of good literacy by providing real world texts to supplement core reading. Students need to broaden their understanding of the world at large through authentic real-world kinds of reading activities. It’s that students understand the value in reading academic texts. Making connections with real world situations that reflect the information being imparted by the text can do this (Gallagher & Allington, 2009).

Additionally, there is real world value in exposing students to literature that speaks to who they are and the way they relate to the world. Philosopher Kenneth Burke argued that the true worth in reading literature is that it provides imaginative rehearsals for the real world. When students are offered real world texts that relate to the novels they are reading it can offer deep insight into living productive lives. Augmenting every book that students read with real world text helps make the connection between insights gained from reading

and application in everyday life and events. Additionally, teachers should focus on providing writing topics that are meaningful and build on the prior interests and knowledge of their particular students so that correlations can be made with real experience. We need to introduce young writers to real world discourses by shifting the purpose of writing instruction towards real world writing purposes (Gallagher, 2011).

Students need many opportunities to engage in all aspects of real world writing including the ability to:

1. Express and reflect
2. Inform and explain
3. Evaluate and judge
4. Inquire and explore
5. Analyze and interpret
6. Take a stand and/or propose a solution

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MEANINGFUL FEEDBACK & COLLABORATION

Effective literacy instruction requires an environment where both teachers and students can provide consequential feedback that stimulates critical thinking, creativity, and ultimately improves literacy (Irvin, Meltzer, & Dukes, 2007). Social collaboration in classrooms helps increase learning, evaluate our opinions and consider new ideas. This type of collaboration also provides an opportunity for both students and teachers to assess student learning by pinpointing students’ understanding of the subject matter. Classrooms that focus on providing regular feedback are able to help students focus on what they can do, rather than what they can’t do

(Gallagher, 2006). Consistent feedback and collaboration also helps students progress towards their writing goals and prevents situations where both students and teachers find out when it's too late that the level of desired learning did not occur. Good literacy programs need to provide both formal and informal opportunities for feedback and collaboration.

Students need to be able to share ideas, engage in discussion to further their thinking and understanding through social collaboration, and encounter diverse perspectives on many topics. Students need opportunities to work collaboratively in both large and small groups. Educators need to incorporate reading and writing resources that provide a multitude of occasions for both informal and formal feedback that allows personalized student learning experiences.

“Classrooms that focus on providing regular feedback are able to help students focus on what they can do, rather than what they can't do.”

CONCLUSION

21st century literacy demands require that we create students who are lifelong readers if we want them to be successful in future academic and career pursuits. Teachers must be empowered and have access to cutting edge resources that support their ability to promote a classroom culture that embodies effective writing instruction, practice, and modeling in ways that excites and engages students (Newkirk, 2009).

“What we are trying to do is find meaningful, purposeful ways to include technology in instruction and assessment because like it or not, that is the world we live in.”

– Seth Mitchell, Teacher and Technology Liaison for the National Writing Project (as cited in Handel, & Heaps, 2010)

The ability to write well goes far beyond scoring well on assessments. The act of quality writing develops important thinking skills and more importantly is at the foundation of producing literate human beings capable of pursuing meaningful endeavors. Students need to understand the real-world purposes behind authentic writing if we expect them to become proficient writers (Gallagher, 2011). They need to be given high quality experiences that expose them to learning through real world writing, teachers who model the writing process, utilize real world mentor texts, and allocate the necessary time it takes to students to grow as writers, regardless of their starting point or primary language (Gallagher, 2015). In order to achieve these results teachers must have access to next generation resources that engage and challenge both themselves and their students. The quality of our children's futures, indeed all of our futures, is resting on this.

“Writing today is not a frill for the few, but an essential skill for the many. Writing is not simply a way for students to demonstrate what they know. It is to help them understand what they know. At its best, writing is learning.”

– National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges

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