Using writing circles to engage students as collaborative authors for the 21st century

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April 3, 2015
Introductions

• Former elementary and middle school English language arts teacher
• Professor of Language Arts and Literacy Education
• ...and, you?
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• GOALS FOR OUR SESSION:

• 1. Define writing circles and collaborative writing groups (Vopat, 2009).

• 2. Share the experiences of implementing writing circles as collaborative writing groups.

• 3. Provide relevant minilessons/or writing activities to enhance the process.
Oh this shiny new computer—
There just isn’t nothin’ cuter.
It knows everything the world ever knew,
And with this great computer
I don’t need no writin’ tutor.
‘Cause there ain’t a single thing that it can’t do.
It can sort and it can spell,
It can punctuate as well.
It can find and file and underline and type.
It can edit and select,
It can copy and correct,
So I’ll have a whole book written by tonight
(just as soon as it can think of what to write).
What are the components/contexts that make writing so difficult?

One idea per slip
Generate as many as you can
Vote with your feet protocol: Let’s try Four Corners

• #1: I don’t know much at all about writing circles at all.
• #2: I think I can surmise what writing circles are, but I’m really not sure how I could make them work in my classroom.
• #3: I know and understand writing circles, I can articulate a definition, but I’m not sure how to implement them.
• #4: I know and understand the essential qualities of writing circles, and I’m pretty sure I have ways to implement them to enhance 21st century learning in my classroom.
What are writing circles?

- Jim Vopat’s (2009) writing circles, similar in format and function to literature circles (think Oprah’s Book Club), can easily be implemented with inquiry groups.
- Writing circles are a group of writers who work and learn together to help each other improve in writing.
- In writing circles, students write collaboratively to document their learning on a particular topic.
Vopat’s great definition:

• “Small groups of students meeting regularly to share drafts, choose common writing topics, practice positive response, and in general, help each other become better writers” (Vopat, 2009, p. 1).
Rationale

• Peer collaboration in writing has shown to be effective in learning to write as well as writing to learn (Graham, McKeown, Kiuhara & Harris, 2012; MacArthur, Schwartz & Graham, 1991; Onrubia & Engel, 2009; Stroch, 2005; Yarrow & Topping, 2001).

• Collaborative writing or writing circles may effectively span from elementary students through to graduate students, starting with prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and moving to submission and possible publication.

• Creating positive and effective writers is best facilitated by engaging in authentic writing experiences (Graves, 1983, 1994; Murray, 2003)
Invigorating experimentation

• My students faces grinned widely when they noticed literature circles on the syllabus, because they had been exposed to this format in earlier coursework.

• However, when I explained the concept of collaborative writing through writing circles, some faces looked a bit nervous. One group even named themselves the Worry Warts.

• This presentation attempts to tell the story of my students evolving as writers through a new strategy called writing circles.
Essential elements of CIRCLES

- Collaboration
- Social
- Small groups based on interest
- Choice is essential
- Workshop with minilessons format
- Flexible and temporary grouping, not based on ability

Think of Lit Circles, and imagine Writing Circles...

What do you imagine the essential elements of Writing Circles to be?
Vopat includes these elements:

- Groups of students name their writing circle and choose their group’s writing topic.
- Kids write on this topic, using any format or genre.
- Writing circle minilessons focus on writing craft.
- Kids share their writing; respond to each other’s writing.
- Students reflect about the writing circle sessions and record their notes in their writing circle notebook.
- Writers participate in a circle devoted to collaborative revision, editing, and publication.
-- Forming groups & generating ideas (Vopat, 2009)? , or...
-- Generating ideas & forming groups (Roberts)
----WHICH came first?

• As a whole, the class generated a list of ten to twelve possible ideas, and I asked for a volunteer who was passionate about one of the topics on the board.
• And, then proceeded to see if we had enough people to form a viable group of about five to seven members.
Getting started in Writing Circles

- Vopat did, however, think of practical components that I would have overlooked:
  - 1. We need a NAME!
  - 2. We need a folder with pockets for each group!
  - 3. Discuss why you chose this group...
Enhancing the writing process & documenting inquiry

• What are some areas of inquiry that this might work in your classroom?

• FIRST ASSIGNMENT: Bring an article or book about the chosen topic 😊 to share with your new group!

• Start a reference sheet.

• Start a list of other information needed; assign these.
Some helps along the way...

- Affinity exercise with post-its
- Move to web, mindmap, bubblemap, outline
- Avoid intro & concl
- Launch in the body, assigning parts.
For writing circles:

• Think audience and provide a REAL audience.
• Think authenticity.
• Think dynamic, growing, changing, improving =JOY!
• Think formats that might offer a new perspective or dimension.
Schedule for writing circles:

- 5-10 min of minilesson
- 10-20 min of application & planning
- Teacher walking & facilitating process
- It’s about the process!!
- It’s not about product yet!

- Generating a stmt of the problem—Find the focus.
- Writing-go-round!
- Transitions & guiding sentences
- Effectively using subtitles
- Erradicting Empty Words
- Adding details that breath life into the topic
- Setting up googledocs
- Using accurate language aligned throughout
- Titles* echo, echo, echo...
- Writing a compelling intro
- Creating a strong finish
- Writing a cover letter
Writing is hard work!
Qualitative Themes

IMPROVEMENT

RELATIONSHIPS

FEEDBACK THRU COLLABORATION

IDEAS
Collaborative writing in WRITING CIRCLES

• Possible obstacles
• Possible benefits
Revisiting Four Corners: Vote with your feet protocol

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• One step at a time! What could be better?

• “Novelists have, on the average, about the same IQs as the cosmetic consultants at Bloomingdale’s department store. Our power is patience. We have discovered that writing allows even a stupid person to seem halfway intelligent, if only that person will write the same thought over and over again, improving it just a little bit each time. It is a lot like inflating a blimp with a bicycle pump. Anybody can do it. All it takes is time.” K. Vonnegut

Imagine how this might work in your classroom!
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What’s it really all about?

• Take a lesson from Kurt Vonnegut’s Seven Deceptively Simple Principles:
• 1. Find a subject you care about.
• 2. Do not ramble, though.
• 3. Keep it simple.
• 4. Have the guts to cut.
• 5. Sound like yourself.
• 6. Say what you mean to say.
• 7. Pity the readers*.
  • “our audience requires us to be sympathetic and patient teachers, ever willing to simplify and clarify... while we would rather ‘soar’ high above the crowd, singing like nightingales.”

“No one will care how well or how badly he expressed himself, if he did not have perfectly enchanting things to say.”