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Cover Page Footnote

The author would like to acknowledge Dr. Robyn A. Hill, National University, who co-facilitated this workshop and provided helpful expertise, and whose input on this article has been valuable and much appreciated.

Real-Life Nature-Based Experiences as Keys to the Writing Workshop

Margot Kinberg ~ National University

Abstract

For many years, research has supported the value of using real-life experiences as teaching opportunities (Noobanjong & Louhapensang, 2017; Powell, 2015). This is just as true of teaching writing as of anything else. In fact, when learners use writing (such as journaling) to share their experiences, they benefit in several ways, including their communication skills (Khanmohammad & Eilaghi, 2017).

Writing workshops have been shown to be effective approaches to coaching writing at several different levels (Williams, 2014). Such workshops provide the opportunity to reflect on drafts, collaborate with peers and work through the writing process. They are, therefore, a highly effective context in which to integrate writing about real-life experiences. This, in turn, allows students to develop their writing and their content knowledge.

In order to investigate the integration of real-life writing practices into the writing workshop, we focused on one important real-life setting: nature. We created a nature-based writer's workshop, Writing in Nature, for students in the upper-elementary/middle grades (ages 10-12). During the two-session workshop, we provided students with a natural setting. Then, we led them in a writing workshop. Results showed high student engagement and interest, both in the topic and in writing. Our findings suggest that using a natural setting for writing workshops is an effective real-life context for increasing engaged time, teaching content, and developing writing skills.

Key Words: Writing Workshop; Teaching of Writing; Experiential Learning; Natural Setting

Introduction

Research has consistently supported the argument that real-life experiences are valuable and effective ways to teach and learn (Powell, 2015). Apprenticeships/internships, service learning, student teaching and clinical practice are among many examples of the way that real-life experiences have been successfully integrated into teaching and learning programs. Such experiences have also been shown to be valuable in the teaching and coaching of writing (Zoch, Myers, Lambert, Vetter, & Fairbanks, 2016).

Given the value of integrating real experiences into the teaching of writing, it is logical to include such experiences regularly. There are many ways in which a writing instructor might go about this. One attractive option is the writing workshop. Among other things, writing workshops have a successful history. Since the 1980s (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1986), writing workshops have been implemented effectively in a wide variety of learning contexts. They have been shown to increase engagement, quality of writing, and learner self-confidence.

The writing workshop therefore presents a highly appropriate structure for integrating students' real-life experiences into their writing. The question then becomes: which real-life contexts are appropriate for this structure? Natural settings offer many benefits. As will be discussed shortly, interaction with nature has been shown to increase focus, improve cognitive function, and increase retention (Wells, 2000). Natural settings have also been shown to support creativity (e.g. Atchley, Strayer, and Atchley, 2012). What is more, such settings need not be costly or inaccessible, and they are free of electronic distractions. Therefore, we decided to explore a natural setting as a context for the teaching of writing.

We chose a two-session workshop format in which we provided students with real-life experiences in nature, and then coached them in writing in two formats: poems and short stories. This paper details our workshops and presents and discusses our findings.

Background to the Study

Real-Life Contexts

Authentic learning contexts have a long history in teaching and learning. Such contexts have been shown to be effective in a variety of different content areas, and a wide variety of learners. As Lombardi (2007, p.1) puts it, "Learning by doing is generally considered the most effective way to learn." And the more real-life those contexts are, the more meaningful they are

for students. In fact, research has suggested a connection between authentic learning contexts and problem-solving activities, and meaningful learning outcomes (Keskitalo, Pyykkö, & Ruokamo, 2011).

Given the connections between real-life experiences, prior knowledge, retention and motivation, it seemed logical to choose a real-life context for the coaching of writing. There is precedent for that choice, too. When students see themselves as writers, and learn to do what writers do, they see the real-life applications of writing. Heppner (2017), for instance, reports on studies in which students were involved in the social practices involved in writing, as well as the authentic discourse that is a part of the writing process. Students who developed their writing skills in these ways were able to see themselves as authors. They wrote, revised, and edited like authors. And they participated in publishing their work. This grounded the students in the real-life practice of writing and honed their writing skills in genuine contexts. Just as importantly, they were engaged in the process.

Real-life contexts have also been shown to be effective in supporting students' other literacy skills. For instance, Kostons and van der Werf (2015) found that students retain more from texts they read when they access prior content knowledge and prior metacognitive knowledge.

Natural Settings as Real-Life Contexts

As there are a number of purposes for writing, there are a number of real-life contexts within which students can develop their writing skills. We chose a nature-based context – that is, a natural setting. Nature offers a number of benefits for teaching and learning. For example, exposure to nature has been shown to enhance students' focus and attentiveness, and increase learning (Wells, 2000). Maynard, Waters, and Clement (2013) found that outdoor environments

also help to increase the amount of child-initiated learning decisions that students make, and to decrease the perception of ‘underachievement.’ And Atchley, Strayer, and Atchley (2012) found that a four-day immersion in a natural environment improved participants’ performance on a creative problem-solving task.

In fact, experiences in nature are so important and valuable that Louv (2008) has linked a lack of time in nature to increased likelihood of depression, anxiety, ADD, and childhood obesity. He refers to this lack as ‘nature deficit disorder,’ and argues for more focus on time in nature.

What is particularly interesting (and appealing for the purposes of this study) is that learning within natural settings is supported by a variety of studies of different aspects of learning and development. This suggests that such contexts enhance the quality of life in a number of ways. So, a natural setting would provide our participants with the opportunity to benefit from nature as well as the opportunity to develop their writing skills. What is more, we anticipated that students would be more engaged in the writing process in a natural setting, since there would be no electronic distractions.

The Writing Workshop

In deciding on the structure for teaching writing, we chose the writing workshop. Exact definitions of the writing workshop vary. However, they generally include student choice, a focus on the process of writing, student interaction, and the publication of student work, among other features (Dinkins, 2014). The writing workshop has been used in several different content areas, and with a variety of different grade, ability, and interest levels.

The writing workshop has been a part of writing pedagogy and andragogy for many decades (Swandler, Leahy, & Cantrell, 2007). While it might have started at the level of higher

education, it has been adapted for use at virtually every educational level, including Kindergarten (Schulze, 2006).

Today's writing workshops vary, depending on the purpose, the participants, and other factors. But, in general, writing workshops include idea sharing, prewriting, drafting, peer feedback/assessment, revision, editing, and publication. The focus is on the learner creating an audience-appropriate piece of writing and working through the writing process. Rather than being didactic, the writing workshop aims to provide learners with an authentic writing experience, and to empower them to develop themselves as writers.

The writing workshop has enjoyed a great deal of success. Researchers such as Jasmine and Weiner (2007) have noted an increased level of confidence in writing, as well as more engagement in writing, as a result of the writing workshop. Other studies, too, have supported the writing workshop as an effective approach to teaching writing (Tracy and Headley, 2013). It is important to note that not all studies have shown writing workshops to be resounding successes (See, for instance, Troja, Lin, Monroe, and Cohen (2009)). And factors other than the workshop format have been shown to impact student outcomes within such contexts (See, for instance, Pollington, Wilcox, and Morrison (2001)). But the writing workshop has, overall, been shown to support student metacognition about writing, as well as student self-confidence, engagement in the process, willingness to persevere in writing, and self-perception as writers. Those outcomes, as well as our interest in an authentic writing context, motivated our choice of the writing workshop.

The Study

The Research Question

Given the benefits of nature as a teaching context, we wanted to explore its use as a setting for the teaching of writing. We posed the following research question: can a natural setting support the writing workshop as a tool for the development of writing skills? Given that both a natural setting and the writing workshop promote engagement and focus, we hypothesized that a writing workshop set within nature would promote participant engagement, that is, time spent focused on the project (Gettinger & Walter, 2012).

Researchers and Participants

I conducted this study with a co-facilitator, Dr. Robyn A. Hill, a colleague who has a background in the impact of nature on learning. Participants were six students between the ages of 10 and 12. More information about these individuals is provided in the next section.

Methodology

There are a variety of approaches to research that could address the research question. We chose the action research model, as we wanted to focus on and inform teaching practice. McKernan (1991), for instance, outlines and builds on the original action research phases: plan, act, observe and reflect. This approach allows the teacher-researcher to learn from the research as it is being conducted, and to use those lessons in the course of the study, and for future practice and research.

Planning. Our planning phase consisted of several informal meetings during which we discussed the factors we would need to consider. Among them were questions of who would participate, how we would expose our participants to a natural setting, and what form of writing we would emphasize.

Participants. We chose to work with participants between the ages of 10 and 12. Students in that age group are typically familiar with a few different writing formats (e.g. poems,

short stories, and longer novels). We solicited participants through a flyer sent to teachers at a local elementary school and then given to students. Eight students' families granted permission for their children to participate. Six students (three male, three female) participated for the duration of the study.

Setting. Another aspect of our planning was the choice of setting. We wanted a setting that would offer a wide variety of plants and animals, but that would also accommodate writing workshop materials. We chose Agua Hedionda Lagoon Discovery Center, in Carlsbad, California. This natural setting allows access to both abundant plant life and small animals such as bearded dragons, finches, and some turtles. Participants would therefore have opportunities to interact with nature during the workshop. The site is also staffed by naturalists and other experts who could answer questions and ensure proper handling of the animals. The setting is also close enough to local schools that transportation would not present a logistical problem.

Acting and Observing

With the planning complete, we turned to the acting phase of this research. Participants met with us for two ninety-minute workshop sessions, held on consecutive Saturday mornings. These times were chosen both to ensure participant availability and to avoid scheduling conflicts at the venue. Participants were instructed not to use personal devices or other electronics during the workshops.

Session One. I began Session One by leading a five-minute whole-group presentation of a short poem, and a discussion of some of the words used in the poem. Then, participants each chose from a collection of shells, and provided a few words to describe those shells. Those words were used in a group poem created by the participants. This activity provided a scaffold for the rest of the writing workshop.

Under Dr. Hill's guidance, participants then went out into Agua Hedionda's nature preserve and chose a plant to study. They spent twenty minutes observing that plant, and then made notes on words that might be used to describe the plant they had chosen.

After their twenty-minute observation, participants returned to the Discovery Center's main building, where they wrote drafts of a poem about the plant they had studied. Once their drafts were completed, participants worked in pairs. They read their drafts to each other and provided feedback on their partners' poems. During this time, I briefly joined each pair, making note of the feedback that was given. Participants also noted the feedback they got.

Participants were then asked to revise their poems and bring them back for the second session. Participants were also encouraged to solicit feedback from me and from Dr. Hill.

Session Two. At the beginning of Session Two, I collected the revised poems, and then read a two-page short story aloud. Then, as a group, participants and I generated a list of words inspired by the story. Then, the group co-wrote a two-paragraph sequel to the short story. This activity served as a scaffold for the second part of the writing workshop.

Under the supervision of Dr. Hill and of the Discovery Center's naturalist, participants then spent twenty minutes choosing and observing one of the resident animal ambassadors. These included turtles, tortoises, bearded dragons, finches, and snakes. Then, they made notes of the animal's appearance, movements, and other distinguishing characteristics. Following this, participants wrote a draft of a short story featuring the animal they had observed. Then, they shared their drafts with a partner, and gave and received feedback. Participants were then given a few moments to begin revisions.

Later that week, participants' families emailed their revised stories to me and to Dr. Hill. We then created and published a short anthology of the poems and short stories. Copies of the anthology were then given to the Agua Hedionda Lagoon Discovery Center, and to each student.

The Data. As a part of the acting and observing phases of this research, we noted the amount of time participants spent studying the plants and animals of their choice, making notes for their writing, and working both in whole-group settings and with partners. We also noted off-task behavior. We also noted which participants sought feedback from us on their work (this was an optional part of the workshop series). We also collected the participants' poems and short stories, both to compile them into an anthology and to note any patterns we found.

The Results. One of the important factors we examined was engaged time, or amount of time that students spend working with the material, which is typically about 50% of class time (Gettinger and Walter, 2012). In the Session One workshop, of the total of 90 minutes, there were ten minutes of downtime at the beginning, as we waited for all participants to arrive, answered parent questions, and provided participants with materials. There were also six minutes of downtime as participants moved from the whole-group setting to their observations, and seven minutes of down time as they moved back to the whole-group setting, and then to pair work. This total, 23 minutes, represents approximately 26% of the workshop time. This means that engaged time in this session was approximately 74% of the workshop time.

In the Session Two workshop, of the total of 90 minutes, there were five minutes of downtime at the beginning, as we waited for all participants to arrive, and provided them with materials. There were five minutes of downtime as participants moved from the whole-group setting to the animal habitats, and six minutes of downtime as participants returned to the whole-

group setting, and then to pair work. This total, 16 minutes, represents approximately 18% of the workshop time, while engaged time represented approximately 88% of the workshop time.

Students were also engaged in the content outside of the workshop. All of the participants revised their poems and sought feedback on them from us. Three participants also revised their short stories, although this was optional, and sought feedback on them from us.

We also noted engagement in other ways. Both of us observed participants as they co-wrote (during the scaffolding process), observed plants and animals, wrote their drafts, and critiqued their peers' work. During all of these activities, participants were on task. Peer-to-peer conversations were almost entirely limited to discussions of the poems and stories, and participant responses to the probes and instructions demonstrated both attention and interest.

Participants were also engaged with the natural surroundings in which the workshops took place. They asked questions of us and of the naturalist, and their conversations with each other were focused on the plants and animals they had observed. Moreover, their poems and short stories reflected what they had learned. For example, one short story included accurate descriptions of finches' calls. Another offered a great deal of information about tortoises, such as:

'Tortoises don't stay in one place, they move every few days so predators don't find their dens.'

We observed precision in participants' word choices, especially after they had revised their work. For instance, one participant described a plant as having two kinds of leaves:

*'The green leaves are rubbery,
But the brown ones are hard, like wood.'*

Another student described a plant as having more or less two stages:

'When I am young, I am light green.

When I am older, I am deep dark brick red.

I am striped like a tiger.'

Participants received no guidance or prompts as they chose their language. Moreover, neither I nor Dr. Hill suggested words to them. Students and their critique partners made those choices.

Reflecting. As we reflected on these results, we compared our participants' engaged time to the typical engaged time of approximately 50% (Gettinger and Walter, 2012). In both of our sessions, we found greater engaged time than is observed in more typical classroom writing sessions. That in itself adds much to the appeal of the natural setting as a real-life context for the writing workshop.

We also found that participants wanted to work on their writing outside of the workshop time. Several of them sought feedback via email even when that was optional. All participants' writing became more precise as they revised, and better reflected what they had learned about the natural setting we used. This, too, demonstrates their level of engagement with the content.

We also reflected on what we learned from this study. Central to the study was the fact that participants did not have access to electronic devices during the workshops. They relied instead on the real-life experiences of being in nature and of observing plants and animals. Their conversations with each other, with us, and with the naturalist were also real-life, rather than virtual. While we did not specifically research the relationship between access to electronics and engagement, it is logical to argue that our participants were more engaged and focused without electronics than they would have been with access to electronics. If so, this likely played a role in increasing their engagement in the activities. That finding is consistent with research (Maynard, Waters, & Clement, 2013) that supports increased engagement when students spend time in

nature. We recommend the practice for those wishing to conduct teaching and learning in natural settings. We also recommend continued action research (as well as other research) into the impact of the use of electronics on teaching and learning. Along with this, we learned the importance of clearly indicating to students and their families when electronic devices are and are not permissible, and to what extent. Clarification of this policy makes a real-life writing experience in the natural setting more valuable, and limits questions and concerns about this expectation.

Also vital to the study was the role played by the Discovery Center's naturalist. Students benefited greatly from the information he provided. More importantly, they were able to use his knowledge to add to the quality of their work. We recommend that those wishing to create a real-life writing experience in a natural setting consider working with someone who has this sort of expertise. Many nature centers, botanical gardens, and animal sanctuaries have such individuals on staff, and close coordination with them is an important part of a successful writing workshop set in nature. In natural settings such as a park, where there may not be a naturalist or other expert available, we recommend including as a facilitator someone with deep background knowledge about local plant and animal life.

Another important factor in these findings was the fact that the workshops began with activities designed to orient participants both to the environment and to the writing process. Each workshop began with me presenting a short piece of writing (a poem for the first workshop, and a short story for the second). This focused students on the sort of writing they would be doing. Before participants observed the plant life, Dr. Hill guided them on a short tour, pointing out a few plant specimens, so that students could choose which ones were of interest to them. The naturalist identified the animals that participants observed, giving some facts about them and

coaching students on correct ways to handle the animals. This orientation provided background information and structure, so that participants could focus more quickly on their observations and their writing. In planning this orientation, we learned that creating an effective real-life setting for a writing workshop requires strong communication between teacher/facilitator and those responsible for the venue. It also requires strong communication between teacher/facilitator and parents. Regular, clear communication, and a carefully articulated plan, are essential to such a workshop.

It should also be noted that there are many kinds natural settings that can be used for a writing workshop. We chose a location that required transportation for the participants. This might not be practicable, so another location might be more feasible. A school may, for instance, have grounds of its own that lend themselves to a writing workshop set in nature. Or, there may be a local park or other nearby option. Choosing such a location may present fewer logistical challenges, but still requires careful planning, organization, and clear communication with students, parents, and others involved.

Through this workshop experience, we also learned that follow-up activities should be included in the planning. While some participants in this research did want feedback, and took the initiative to seek it, a clearer and better-articulated plan for that part of the process would likely have increased participant engagement in reflective follow-up.

Conclusions

Based on participants' engaged time in these workshops, we concluded that the real-life context of the natural setting supported engaged time. Considering the use of language in participants' poetry and stories, we also concluded that participants acquired and used new knowledge about local plants and animals. Their choices of words and their descriptions

indicated that they had retained the information they had heard and observed. Moreover, we concluded that the real-life experience of being in nature and of observing and handling animals increased participants' engagement and motivation.

The writing workshop format was chosen in large part because it has been successful in supporting student engagement, self-confidence and metacognition about writing. Our results support this format as an effective approach to coaching and teaching writing. We also concluded that the writing workshop is a flexible format that can be adapted for use in natural environments, such as the one we selected for our study.

It should be carefully noted that these workshops were conducted with a small, self-selected group of participants. Therefore, any conclusions are necessarily limited. It would be highly desirable to conduct a writing workshop in a natural setting with a larger group of participants from more varied backgrounds. With this in mind, though, we argue that real-life experiences in nature can be effective contexts for writing workshops.

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