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## Teachers as co-authors: internalizing the writing process

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*Our goal as teacher educators should be to train exemplary teachers who can elicit superior writing from their students. But how can this goal be accomplished? How can we hope to train exemplary teachers who will elicit superior writing if we do not first provide a way for our graduate students, our future teachers, to experience and internalize the writing process?*

Tompkins (2000) has described the writing process as having five stages; pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, and publication. Each of these stages is made up of key features that graduate students must *know* without hesitation if they are to teach children.

With this thought in mind, thirty-five students attending two different sections of a graduate education course entitled “Teaching Reading and Written Communication” at the C. W. Post campus of Long Island University, became participants in a special writing project that was designed to engage them in the five stages of the writing process, to allow them to *experience* those stages first hand so that they could truly internalize each stage and its key features. During the first class session, the students were placed into seventeen co-authoring groups. Because of the odd number of students, one group consisted of three students while the remaining sixteen groups consisted of two students each. A portion of each class session was set aside for student participation in this writing project.

### **Getting started – the importance of pre-writing**

Pre-writing is often a stage that students of all ages tend to dismiss. It is the stage during which many initial decisions are made. Here, students are expected to decide upon a topic, identify not only their audience, but also the very purpose for their writing. It is during pre-writing that students are expected to gather and organize ideas and choose an appropriate form for their written piece based upon the audience and purpose they have

chosen (Tompkins, 2000). In essence, pre-writing gives the student not only direction but also acts as the foundation for the draft that will eventually follow.

The graduate students were informed that the professor had already determined one important aspect of the writing process - that of form. This is always an important aspect of writing. Will the writing take the form of a story, a letter, a poem, or a journal entry? In this particular instance, the professor had made that determination. The co-authoring groups were asked to create an original children's storybook complete with text and illustrations. It was pointed out that teachers often make this determination as they plan their lessons for their children. The graduate students were made aware that what they were experiencing was what their children might experience if the graduate students chose the form for their students' writing project.

The graduate students were asked initially to determine a topic for their book. Would their book focus on the first day of school, getting lost in the woods, or possibly delving into the problems experienced by a child who just happened to own a very unusual pet? Choosing a topic was an important aspect of the hands-on project because the graduate students needed to understand the uncertainty that children face when trying to settle on a particular topic. They had to experience for themselves the process of discovery so that they would not be tempted to supply topics for children that could, in effect, act as an impediment to creativity. Graves (1976) calls this traditional approach of supplying topics for students "writing welfare." Put simply, supplying a topic could place children in a situation where they could be asked to write about something with which they had little or no familiarity and/or in which they might not be interested. The graduate students needed to understand that children had to take the responsibility for choosing their own topics while, at the same time, knowing that for some children this might seem overwhelming. In that instance, facilitation would become necessary. The teacher could help children brainstorm a list of topics, eliciting the information from the children rather than supplying the list of topics. In this way, the children would still have an interest in, if not some type of familiarity with, the topics they brainstormed.

Once the graduate students chose a topic, they were encouraged to talk about that topic, draw pictures if that helped, or even do a bit of research to determine if that was the topic they truly wanted to pursue.

Once the topic had been selected, the graduate students were asked to consider a purpose for writing their books beyond the obvious apparent purposes; to entertain, to inform, or to persuade. Would their chosen purpose be to promote a sense of fair play, engender empathy, dispel misconceptions about diversity, explore the wonders of friendship, etc.? Each group wrestled with this particular aspect of pre-writing, discussing at length various possibilities until they finally selected one that was a good fit.

The graduate students then concentrated on answering other related questions. What grade level would their projected audience be? Would the topic and purpose be aimed at primary school children or elementary and middle school children? And how would their chosen audience influence the vocabulary they used for their children's book? It was at this point that the professor distributed EDL lists that contained vocabulary appropriate for various grade levels. Each co-authoring pair was also asked to use a thesaurus in conjunction with the EDL list so that, as they wrote their story, they could try to use vocabulary that would be appropriate for the grade level of the audience they had selected. They were given the option of writing a book for children to read themselves or a book that would be read to children. They were instructed that if they chose the latter option, they would have more leeway with the vocabulary because they would be concerned with listening comprehension as opposed to reading comprehension, thus allowing more-sophisticated vocabulary. The students wrestled with these questions during the first three writing project sessions. They were encouraged to jot down their ideas and to continue thinking about more ideas outside of class. They were asked to exchange phone numbers and encouraged to contact their co-authors and exchange their ideas.

It was made clear that teaching children to make decisions about purpose, audience, and form is an important component of writing instruction. In each case, children need to know the range of options available to writers (Tompkins, 2000).

Finally, it was time for the graduate students to gather and organize their ideas. Some of them drew pictures to explain their thoughts; others talked with their classmates or their professor about their ideas. Some groups decided to read stories that had already been written on the topic they had chosen or found information books or other texts to help them. A few groups used graphic organizers; others retold stories that had been favorites of theirs during their own childhood. Some co-authoring groups decided simply to write. As the graduate students moved through this portion of the pre-writing stage of the writing process, they were informed that these very activities would be activities that children would involve themselves in naturally as they organized their own ideas. Graves (1983) calls these activities that children use to activate prior knowledge, gather and organize ideas, and collect words "rehearsal" activities. The professor took time to explain to the graduate students that some children need to draw first before they write, just as some of the graduate students admitted to feeling more comfortable drawing first to help them organize their thoughts about their chosen topic. As young children become writers, they use drawing and other symbol systems as they grapple with the uniqueness of writing (Dyson, 1993). It is yet another way of gathering and organizing ideas before beginning a draft of their story.

During each of these sessions the professor played the role the graduate students would take on in the real world - that of the classroom teacher. The professor modeled for the graduate students, taking the role of facilitator, scaffolding where necessary, acting as a sounding board when needed, encouraging creativity and empowering the

graduate students to think “outside the box.” Eventually, all seventeen co-authoring groups made their decisions about the various key features in the pre-writing stage of the writing process and were ready to pursue the second stage; drafting.

### **Drafting – shelving mechanics and focusing on creative ideas**

The drafting stage of the writing process should be the point at which students put their ideas down on paper. Mechanics and surface characteristics such as spelling, punctuation, sentence structure, paragraph format etc should not be a concern. This stage is centred on recording ideas. Ideas can be like quicksilver, fleeting and tenuous. Therefore, the graduate students were encouraged to forget about mechanics and asked to simply concentrate on their own creative ideas. They were advised that the opening of the story or “lead,” as it is sometimes known, would be crucial. The opening would entice their readers to continue to read further. Those first few paragraphs would provide the “hook” - the reason for their readers to read on. The professor took the time to discuss some of the graduate students’ favorite books. They were asked why they found themselves compelled to read on. Without exception, the graduate students responded that the very beginning of the story grabbed their attention and made them curious about what would happen next. The graduate students were asked to keep this in mind as they began the lead for their draft of their children’s story. Time and again, the professor was asked to listen to the graduate students’ “leads.” This allowed the professor the opportunity to underline for each co-authoring group how crucial this part of the story was to “hooking” their audience and advised them that children needed to experience writing leads, too. Graves (1983) and Calkins (1996) recommend that students create several leads and try them out on classmates before deciding on one.

With the professor’s guidance, the graduate students wrote a rough draft where content was the focus, not mechanics. In some instances, the draft they wrote made it necessary for changes to be made in their choice of topic, purpose, or even audience. The professor supported these changes, pointing out that when writers write, they often change these aspects as the written piece takes form. That is why emphasizing mechanics at this point of the writing process can spell disaster for children. The professor stated this fact, affirming that when teachers point out mechanical errors during the drafting stage, they send a false message to students that mechanical correctness is more important than content (Sommers, 1982). The graduate students were informed that mechanics should be addressed during the editing phase, one of the last stages of the writing process.

### **Revising – “seeing again” – looking at content, not mechanics**

During the revising stage of the writing process, writers clarify what they want to say by re-reading their rough drafts and sharing their rough drafts in a writing group. They make revisions based upon the feedback they receive from those people in the writing group.

Because the graduate students were placed in co-authoring groups, this stage of the writing process moved along quite naturally. Graduate students took home copies of their rough drafts and worked on it individually, bringing their updated versions to class each week to share with their co-authors. At this point they co-ordinated their efforts at creating a stronger draft based upon the individual work they had done at home. They soon became aware that revising did not mean simply polishing their story; it meant looking at what they had written again with the thought in mind that they might indeed have to delete, add, or rearrange material. Without exception, the leads they had originally written in their first drafts changed over time as the graduate students became more adept at manipulating language, became more aware of viewpoint, and became better able to sequence scenes. The professor emphasized that the word revision means “seeing again” and, in this stage, writers see their compositions again with their classmates and the teacher helping them (Tompkins, 2000).

### **Editing – the focus changes to correcting mechanical errors**

Once the graduate co-authoring groups had revised their drafts, it was time for them to put their composition into its final form. Up until this point, the focus has been first and foremost on developing the content of the composition. They were instructed that during the editing stage, the focus changes to mechanics. During this stage children are expected to “polish” their writing by correcting spelling and other mechanical errors. Mechanics includes capitalization, punctuation, spelling, sentence structure, usage, and formatting considerations specific to poems, scripts, letters, and other writing forms (Tompkins, 2000). The professor stated that, although there were workbooks available that would provide practice for children in correcting mechanical errors, the most effective way to teach mechanical skills was during the editing stage of the writing process rather than through workbook exercises (Fearn & Farnan, 1998).

The professor discussed various ways of handling the editing stage with the graduate students; editing checklists, editing committees, and peer editing were all explored. The co-authoring groups chose to use peer editing, relying on one another to edit their errors. When they had completed their peer editing, they would often enlist the aid of the professor if they had any further questions. At one point, all of the co-authoring groups had a common question regarding the proper writing of dialogue. This question led naturally to a mini-lesson on dialogue writing. Once again, the professor took the opportunity to point out that just as this mini-lesson was found to be necessary for the graduate students as a class, they might find their children to have similar needs for mini-lessons and that, in fact, these mini-lessons should be based upon the particular needs of the specific student populations they would be working with.

### **Publishing – a time to share**

With four stages of the writing process complete, the graduate co-authoring groups moved onto the final stage of the writing process where they would publish their work

and share it with others. It is at this stage that children and those close to them need to recognize the fact that they have become authors. Graves and Hansen (1983) suggest that one way to help students develop the concept of author is to have a special chair in the classroom designated as the “author’s chair.” Whenever children read their own books aloud, they sit in that chair. Through sitting in the special author’s chair to share their books; children gradually realize that they are authors. They share their sense of accomplishment with their audience.

The graduate students in turn experienced that sense of accomplishment as each co-authoring group moved to the front of the classroom to take their place in the author’s chair. The professor took this opportunity to remind them that the children they would be teaching would share these same feelings of accomplishment. Before they read their book, the graduate students were asked to explain how they had come up with their topic and how they had determined their particular audience and purpose. They were asked to describe how they had produced their illustrations and married them to the text they had already created and edited. They were asked to describe their decisions regarding the type and size of their book cover, the binding, and the style for their title page. Each co-authoring group then read their finished children’s book. Each co-author read a portion of their book. For the sixteen co-authoring pairs, it meant that one student read from the beginning of the book to the middle and the other student read from the middle to the end of the book. For the seventeenth group that had three members, one student read the beginning, one read the middle and the third member of the group read the end of the book.

The assembled graduate students and their professor were thrilled with each new book. Some books had clever twists, while others contained engaging illustrations. They all marveled at their own newly-discovered abilities as well as those of their peers. Buoyed by a creative surge many had never experienced, a few co-authoring groups advised the class that they had decided to continue writing together even after the course ended, hoping to blaze new career paths as children’s authors.

Appendix A is the book covers along with excerpts from the beginning, middle, and end of two of the children’s books co-authored by graduate students involved in the writing project. Each book was selected as a representative sample from the two course sections involved in the project.

Dyson (1989) stated that students of all ages benefit from practising various kinds of writing with different purposes in mind. As we set about training our graduate students to assume the crucial task of teaching children, we must instill in them the importance of having a thorough grasp of the writing process, we must allow them the opportunity to internalize that process using hands-on activities that will encourage them to learn through their own mistakes, their own use of trial and error. This is an important concept because children *also* learn by trial and error. In fact, children learn by trial and error long before they come to school. Teachers can help students verify

their right to trial and error, a process that they bring to school but too often is ignored or even rejected (Pehrsson & Robinson, 1985).

Although the teaching of writing may be a time-consuming process, it is nonetheless a necessary process for it is with time that children test their ideas, make their mistakes, and in essence have the opportunities to learn by trial and error, which is the very essence of learning itself (Pehrsson & Robinson, 1985).

Our goal as teacher-educators should be to train exemplary teachers, teachers who are familiar with all aspects of literacy. With this in mind, we must encourage our graduate students to internalize and celebrate the writing process by actually experiencing it first hand. With this knowledge and experience, they will become more effective teachers of the writing process. Those who benefit will be, no doubt, the children in their charge.

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## **APPENDIX A**

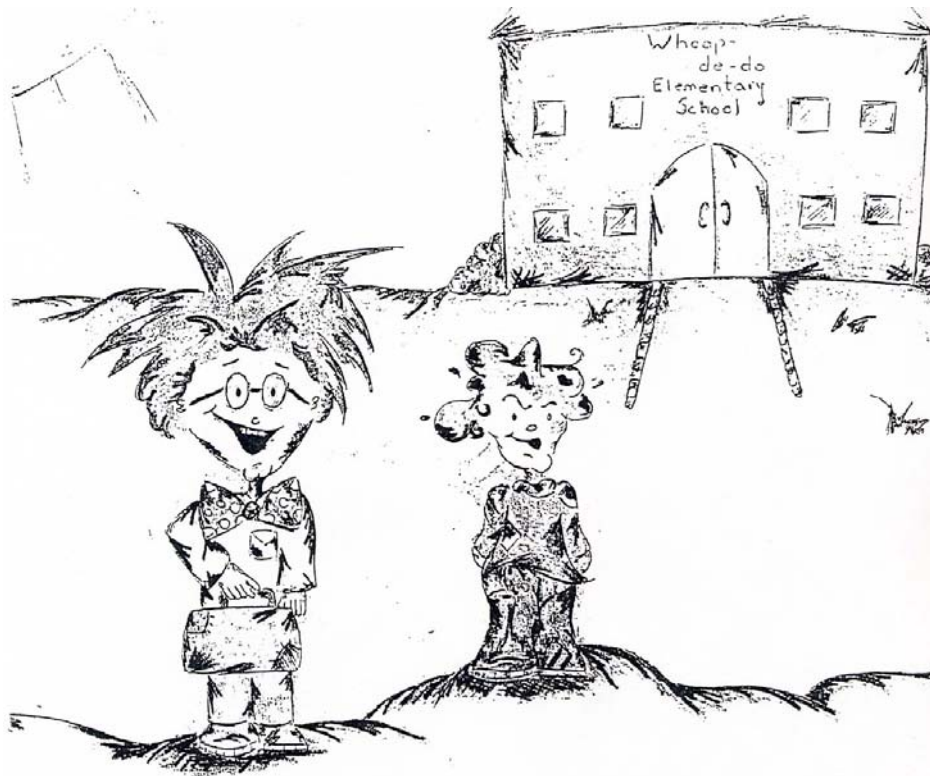
Two Graduate Students' Samples of Co-authored  
Children's Books – Including Sample Book Covers, Sample  
Beginnings, Middles, and Ends for each book.

Teachers as Co-authors: Internalizing the Writing Process

Below are the book covers with excerpts from the beginning, middle, and end of two of the children's books co-authored by graduate students involved in the writing project. Each book was selected as a representative sample from the two course sections involved in the project.



Cover: **The Case of the Missing Magic E** by Jennifer Miller & Nicole Damone, co-authoring group from the first section of the writing project.



Each morning, Herbert Q. arrived promptly at Whoop-de-do Elementary School with what appeared to be his father's old beat-up briefcase in hand. He even wore a polka-dot bow-tie and a pocket protector! I don't know any kid with a pocket protector, do you?

Well, as you may have guessed, Herbert Q. did not have many friends. Aside from his teacher, he only had one, Derek Dirt. And believe me, the name fit! Derek Dirt stood about 3-and-a-half feet tall, but he seemed even shorter. He wore raggedy clothes, and let's just say he wasn't the cleanest kid in school.

This is a sample page from the beginning of Jennifer and Nicole's co-authored book.



Herbert Q. and Derek Dirt were determined to solve the mystery. Well, at least Herbert was. Herbert had a sneaking suspicion that a certain someone had stolen the "Magic E." But why? And how would he prove it? Herbert Q. thought and thought.

Suddenly, it came to him! "I've got it! I've got it!" he yelled.

"You've got what?" questioned Derek.

"I've got a motive!" he proudly stated. "I've got her first and last name, too!" continued Herbert Q.

"Who?" asked Derek, looking quite confused.

"It was Eleanor E. She's the crafty thief. Don't you get it Derek? Eleanor stole the 'Magic E' because both her first and last name start with the letter 'E,'" explained Herbert.

"Oh, right," said Derek, still looking puzzled.

This is a sample page from the middle of Jennifer and Nicole's co-authored book.



Mrs. Frankenheimer's face turned beet red. She was furious! Eleanor E.'s eyes welled up with tears and she began to cry. We couldn't believe it! We all just stood there with our mouths hanging open. The biggest bully in the school was crying in front of the whole 4<sup>th</sup> grade class!

"Eleanor Edison! I have never been so utterly disappointed in all my years of teaching!" Mrs. Frankenheimer's tone clearly expressed her disappointment.

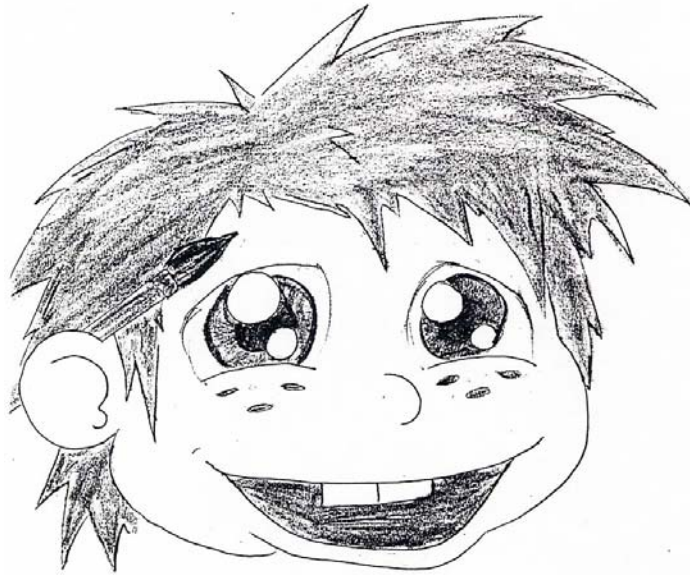
"Eleanor, you march yourself right down to Mr. Leader's office!"

The class gasped! They couldn't believe that Eleanor was being sent to the principal's office! No 4<sup>th</sup> grader had ever made that dreadful journey.

This is a sample page from the end of Jennifer and Nicole's co-authored book.

# **Rupert Pumpernickel**

*Written by: Erin Egerton and Kerry O'Connor*



Cover: **Rupert Pumpernickel** by Erin Egerton & Kerry O'Connor,  
co-authoring group from the second section of the writing project.





Page 1

It was a typical October Monday morning. The sun was shining, and the trees overflowed with yellow, orange, and red leaves. Everything was just fine. Mrs. Anderson's students had arrived and were sitting in their seats. She was taking attendance, when she heard a knock at the door.

This is a sample page from the beginning of Erin and Kerry's co-authored book.



For the last fifteen minutes of the day, Mrs. Anderson said the class could draw or read quietly. Rupert looked sad. It was the end of his first day in a new school, and he hadn't even made one friend. As he sat quietly drawing at his desk, Mrs. Anderson peeked over his shoulder. She was amazed at what she saw. Rupert was quite a talented little artist.

This is a sample page from the middle of Erin and Kerry's co-authored book.





Mrs. Anderson was tidying up in the classroom, getting ready to leave. She grabbed her brief case, and overcoat. Suddenly she sensed someone else was there. She turned around and Rupert Pumpernickel flung his arms around her. "Thank you, thank you so much Mrs. Anderson for helping me make a friend" he whispered. "You're welcome Rupert" Mrs. Anderson whispered back as she watched him joyfully skip out the door.

This is a sample page from the end of Erin and Kerry's co-authored book.