



## **2017 DONALD H. GRAVES WRITING AWARD REFLECTIVE ESSAY**

Writing? Writing? 5-6-7 year olds can't write stories or anything for that matter? Why do we think we can submit for a "writing award" when we don't teach grades that "write"? The mind of a very young child wants to explore, explain, and engage yet requires gentle guidance into this new world of writing. We are a learning community: Robbie Stout, kindergarten, Laura Furman, first grade, Liz Soper, first grade, Jenna Loomis, first grade, and Michelle Doyle, third grade. Over the last few years, our team has worked together to bring writing to our students. Storying Studio has allowed us to plan and facilitate good practices in three schools across four grade levels. The collaboration of our team motivates us to be better educators and provide rigorous, student engagement.

### From Writing Workshop to Storying Studio

Writing workshop, pioneered by Donald Graves(1983) and his associates in the 1970-1980s, has continued to play a critical role in literacy education by helping students understand the process, develop skills and a passion for writing, and perceive themselves as writers. It was developed at time, though, when literacy was primarily defined as reading and writing written texts. Drawing was viewed as an acceptable stage through which children passed on their developmental journey to becoming writers and readers. When reading picturebooks, and other texts with images, adults often focused readers on the written text. Artwork served the purpose providing clues to written text if the reader experienced difficulty. In recent decades, perceptions of literacy and literacy education have shifted to focus on multiple ways learners construct and create meaning including art.

Storying Studio was conceived the day, during writing workshop in first grade, we stepped back and realized the range of "workshop" things happening that were not "writing". Over several years we developed mini-lessons to explore both the written and pictorial texts in picturebooks and study the ways artists, as well as authors, make meaning. Children learned the Elements of Art and Principles of Design, the language artists use to compose, and incorporated those into their own art. That day when we stepped back in addition to writing, we observed children using books as mentor texts to get ideas, conferencing about their work with their peers, and discussing with each other the best way to represent what they wanted to say in writing and/or art.

Story for us is both a noun and a verb. As a noun stories are narratives. Fiction and non-fiction stories are how humans make sense of the world and how we

organize our lives. Children have stories too. It is through stories that they share who they are, their joys/sorrows, and the happenings of their lives.

As a verb, story refers to composing in writing and art, weaving the meanings created in each together. In Storying Studio, children don't write and illustrate, they story. To demonstrate Storying Studio, what follows are examples of mini-lessons focused on Elements of Art (line, space), Principles of Design (contrast), and writing. We focus primarily on art since it tends to be less familiar. Each mini-lesson gives the students opportunities to READ, EXPLORE, and STORY. Reading picturebooks to our students is essential to Storying Studio. In addition to their richness and power in helping readers understand life and themselves through story, they are mentor texts and invite learners to study the craft of written language and art and then explore those techniques in their own work. Since the purpose of the mini-lesson is to learn and use a particular focus, EXPLORE is typically more teacher-directed, though the children use their own ideas. The mini-lessons are followed by STORY examples of children weaving meanings in writing and art. While the concept of Storying Studio is new for us, it reframes the work with mini-lessons and composing picturebooks that we have been doing in classrooms for years.

So we read stories, point out concepts of art, provide some simple materials and it's off to STORY. We do it again and again using incredibly orchestrated choices in literature and art. Our learning community meets and shares author studies, wordless books, and mini-lessons on foreground, background, texture, etc. Then we go back to our schools and do it over and over again, and we become cheerleaders for the story telling through their art. When we make time daily, it all grows and becomes more exciting for the child to extend and enrich their stories based on enthusiasm, guidance, techniques, and applications of additional skills. As a learning community, we can submit for a WRITING AWARD, because we have evidence that through art we begin the process of writing. We are not art teachers, we have no skills in art. We are not writing teachers, we have no skills as a writer, but we are teachers of developing children. We have the opportunity to nurture that which has become most evident over the years, that through genuine close conversations; honest feedback; opportunity; time, and exposure to fine literature and art that the desire to write will become stronger and stronger.

Our learning community has been teaching together for eight years. While we now teach at three different schools, we meet monthly to share picturebooks, mini-lessons, and ideas across grade levels. We present together and have presented at NCTE for the last eight years with a commitment to continuing to share our work with our fellow teachers. As a community of 5 teachers, we submitted 5 student portfolios as a sample of from each of our classrooms.