



If you want your students to experience the authenticity (it's real!), the productivity (they learn more and better!), and the sheer joy (they love it!) of learning to read *and* write together, seamlessly, and synergistically—and do it all in a studio setting (where they are the artists!)—then Ellin Keene's *The Literacy Studio* is the book for you. As a bonus, you'll experience the same authenticity, productivity, and joy as a teacher (and learner!) in the studio.

—P. David Pearson



Ellin Oliver Keene

The Literacy Studio

Redesigning
the Workshop
for Readers
and
Writers

HEINEMANN
Portsmouth, NH

For more information about this Heinemann resource, visit <https://www.heinemann.com/products/e12005.aspx>.

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CHAPTER ONE

Why Literacy Studio?

This book was born in the Rose Main Reading Room of the New York Public Library. The library, at 42nd Street and 5th Avenue, is home to the huge concrete lions, Patience and Fortitude, that rest on either side of the steps leading into the spectacular building. The Reading Room is 297 feet long, roughly the length of one city block, and its interior is one of the most iconic public spaces in the city where, if I'm honest, I am happiest. I have never chosen the birthplace of a book intentionally, but for this one I wanted to capture my first ideas alone in the presence of others, a phrase that has always spoken to me. It suggests that meaningful work in the mind happens best, side by side with those who are deeply engrossed in their books, their newspapers, their writing. It suggests a community, nearby but slightly apart. It suggests a studio of sorts, a hive of cognitive activity, discovery, expression, and some healthy staring into space.

Alone in the presence of others is where I wanted to collect my earliest ideas for this book—among other thinkers, people from every conceivable walk of life who had come to that spot for the silence and the white noise of clicking keys and sighs, overheard conversation, coughing, and the rustle of newsprint. I wanted to be among those who have peopled this hallowed space every day for years and years, people who have grown old in the same, almost soft wood swivel chairs; I wanted to be among those to whom the habit of thinking and rethinking is air and water.

The Reading Room suggests a tone I want to strike in classrooms—a thriving birthplace for ideas from text, great conversation (which no longer must be whispered, at least on one side of the Reading Room), and the emergence of a writer’s words on a page. In the Reading Room, all those things happen simultaneously. A reader swerves into writing for a few minutes and then returns to reading. The writer pours through pages in books, seeking and finding inspiration, and, with no perceptible change in purpose, turns back to generating their own text, and returns to reading.



As my fingers began to move across the keyboard that day, I wrote, “In literacy teaching and learning, we want to foster authenticity and a sense of possibility—students choose their topics and books; we work alongside each other in service of the children’s goals as readers and writers. There is a sense of freedom to experiment with language, but it comes with serious engagement, a commitment to trying what they’ve learned from the teacher and other readers and writers, and a sense of responsibility for each other. I imagine (and have seen!) classrooms where there is a palpable sense of possibility; we can’t wait to hear what kids have to say about books and we hold our breath as they share their writing. There is just no doubt that they are going to dazzle us. We know they will, and they don’t disappoint. We teach the essential concepts in literacy; we align those concepts to their needs. We trust kids.”

These early jottings transported me back to my own classroom, to a year when I was teaching fifth grade. I harbored some of the same hopes as I’ve just shared, but at that moment I was beyond frustrated and beginning to believe that I was incompetent. Perhaps I should get a job as a ski instructor (in my dreams!). My literacy block wasn’t working. I was trying to ensure that my students had enough time to read and write each day; I knew I had to address my district’s curriculum goals; I was woefully short on time to confer with students; I didn’t feel like I had a solid understanding of their progress; they almost never had time to share; moving toward a solution in one area felt like I had opened a can of worms in the others. When it was time for spring break, I was bone-tired, and I was just damn well going to ski every day of the break,

But that was the year of way too little snow in Colorado. If that had been the year of just enough snow, or an abundance of snow, the Literacy Studio might never have been born.

I sat at home that spring break and became more downtrodden. I was a lousy teacher *and* there was no snow? C’mon, unfair universe, give a girl a break! It was an exercise in self-pity about which I am not proud, but it led to the moment when I sat down at my kitchen table and decided to sketch out some new schedules, to start fresh. I am a bit aghast at my audacity to just rethink everything about my literacy instruction in a week, but that’s exactly what I did. Ah, youth. I reasoned that if I tried an entirely new approach in the last quarter of that year, I would learn what needed to be amended for the fall of the next school year. I wasn’t wrong.

I called our reboot Literacy Studio. It was designed mainly to buy me some more time to confer, but I came to realize that the new structure made far more sense to kids and reinvigorated the whole literacy block in a way I couldn't have imagined. I clearly remember the day I greeted my kids after spring break and announced with great fanfare that they were now part of a Literacy Studio. I made it sound like something real and important, not something I made up at my kitchen table!

What was a Literacy Studio? I told them it meant that we would be working as readers and writers throughout the time set aside for literacy. It meant that, whenever possible, I would teach reading and writing together in one lesson. It meant that they could—gasp—*choose* when to read and when to write if they could ensure that they gave equal time to both. They *loved* that part. It meant that they would have more time to talk with each other about books and their writing and that they would take more responsibility for choosing their books and writing topics. They *loved* that part too.

We fumbled through that quarter together and met frequently to discuss how it was going. What if they wanted to read for three days in a row and then write for three days in a row? What if they wanted to read the same book with a friend? What if they wanted to coauthor a piece with a friend? How could they make sharing time less, well, boring? We felt like problem-solvers, putting our heads together to make this important time of the day more meaningful. I felt the sense of possibility seep back into our work. I felt more confident. I was a little worried that I'd just gone rogue in my school, but none of my team members were on board, so I just went for it. I have an ongoing problem with authority—ask any family member—so I loved that part. I was going my own way to make the workshop work for us.



Take a moment to visualize the scene that is the norm in many American reader's and writer's workshops today. How do children currently experience much of their work as readers and writers? The workshop often begins with the students gathering to hear a wonderful read-aloud; the teacher shares their thinking and perhaps invites the students to talk about what they've discovered about themselves as readers, the goals they're working toward.

Then everyone transitions into independent reading and starts reading; some may lose focus for a time, some regain it and resume reading, and some may or may not lose focus again; then it's time to put their books away. Finally, they all gather again to listen to some students share, take a quick stretch break, and . . . repeat the whole process with a writing lesson. Two lessons. Four transitions. A limited time to dig into their independent reading or writing. Lather, rinse, repeat!

At Indian Trails, we got started with Literacy Studio by first working on our classroom environment. Teachers started letting students work on their reading and writing around the room and joined them in their workspaces for conferring. We learned to create lessons that teach the reader and the writer, which were based on a lot more modeling and thinking aloud. We noticed that students get started more quickly and stamina has increased.

—Kristi Odell, Instructional Coach, Indian Trails Elementary, Fort Osage, MO

Many teachers have grown frustrated with some elements of their literacy workshop and just wish they could design the workshop in a way that more fully meets *their students' needs*. I know—obviously, I felt the same way in my own classroom. The two most frustrating issues among my colleagues are that students don't have enough time for independent reading and writing and that they find it difficult to confer as often as they would like. They long for a workshop structure that is more flexible—one they can adjust week by week, month by month depending on their students' goals, progress, temperaments, and needs.

There are other vexing questions, particularly about the separate silos in which we currently work in reader's and writer's workshops:

- What led us to teach reading and writing separately? Given the inextricable ties between oral and written language, reading and writing, listening and speaking, why would we provide instruction on one at a time?
- Does it make sense to students to focus on reading and writing separately?

- Aren't there ways that reading and writing standards and curriculum align?
- When we long to provide more time for students to read and write independently, more time to confer with individuals, why would we teach two lessons a day, endure four transitions, and try to get some sharing time squeezed in? Doesn't that structure consume too much of the time we hope our students will spend actually reading and writing?
- What impact do separate reading and writing times have on student engagement?

There are so many more. Let's just look at that first question: What led us to teach reading and writing separately?

Do you remember your own elementary experience? Most of us experienced reading and writing as separate subjects. In fact, in my intermediate-grade years, I had different teachers for reading and writing, as many elementary students do today. Even in the most ideal circumstances where teachers plan together and communicate well, what conclusions do students draw as they pack up their writing materials and tromp down the hall to a different reading teacher? I worry that they, like I did at their age, see reading and writing as two entirely different disciplines.

I know I didn't make connections from the books I read to my own writing. I was a kid who loved to write, so I wrote stories at home because most of my "writing" classes had more to do with conventions, punctuation, and grammar than they did with encouraging us to create. There were so many missed opportunities, ways my teachers might have connected reading and writing. I don't want today's students to miss that integration.

These questions have troubled me for some time. In fact, I have a difficult time understanding why we persist in separating reading and writing. Do we teach reading and writing separately because published programs separate them? Maybe it's because we assess reading and writing separately? Are we "preparing them for middle school" by having them walk down the hall in a passing period? Is it related to our tendency to follow one approach in reading and another in writing? The fact is that we *have* separated reading and writing instruction to a greater or lesser degree, and it is past time to rethink it. We can do better for students, and we can regain control over the tyranny of the clock at the same time.

Perhaps you're wondering if research supports the integration of reading and writing. Guess what? We've had research for decades (e.g., Tierney and Pearson 1983; Knapp 1995; Morrow et al. 1999; Pressley et al. 1997; Wharton-McDonald, Pressley, and Hampston 1998) that suggests that teachers capitalize on the symbiotic relationship between reading and writing.

Graham (2017), for example, found that the more time elementary students spent writing and the more writing instruction they received, the more robust their gains in comprehension of texts. He argued, as have many others, that when students are reading, they can learn to think about the author (become metacognitive) and can focus on ways in which the author is manipulating (I'm going to use the word *manipulating* throughout this book as a positive thing that writers do!) their thinking. Those skills can, in turn, be used when it is the student's turn to compose. In his podcast, Graham goes on to say that "current understanding in the field of literacy dictates that reading and writing mutually reinforce one another and rely on some of the same cognitive processes." He cites Fitzgerald and Shanahan (2000); Shanahan (2006); and Tierney and Shanahan (1991). This insight suggests that instruction may be more effective when teachers integrate reading and writing experiences in the classroom. Tierney and Shanahan (253) suggest that "exemplary teachers who produce high-achieving readers and writers tend to integrate the two domains regularly and thoroughly in the classroom."



Many of us have long seen the wisdom in connecting reading and writing, but we don't usually *plan* to integrate instruction. If something related to writing occurs to us while teaching a reading lesson, we might mention it. If we're reading and writing in the same genre, we might study some mentor texts to help students improve their writing, but we often aren't intentional about the integration. It's difficult to remember to make the connection—if we aren't planning integrated lessons, do we imagine that students will automatically and seamlessly connect what they learn in separate writing and reading lessons? Do we imagine that they will pause to think, "Hmm, I'm learning that writers introduce characters through exposition, action,

and dialogue. I think I'll need to consider how the author of the book I'm reading does the same"? Hmm, maybe not!

We want so much for our students. We want them to connect reading and writing; we want them to have more choice; we want them to have much more time to read and write. I don't know a teacher who doesn't value integration, choice, and time! And I know plenty who have taken the plunge; they have rearranged their literacy block structures to meet those three important goals, which are, not coincidentally, the three goals of this book!

1. We want students to see *the connections* between the books they read and their work as writers. We want these connections to be more than a happy accident. We want students to move seamlessly between reading and writing gleaning insight from both, even at the earliest grade levels.
2. We want students to have more *choice* in the texts they read and the topics about which they write, because choice often leads to deeper and more sustained engagement.
3. Perhaps most importantly, we want students to have more *time* to read and write each day—that's how they get better!

If those are the goals to which we aspire in our literacy workshops, we need to make the connections between reading and writing explicit. We need to teach students *how* to choose the texts they read and the topics about which they write. When they can choose texts and topics, we can invite them to choose *when* they read and *when* they write. And because we know (Allington 2011) that reading and writing independently is the single most important variable in student growth, we simply must carve out more time in the day for them to *practice* as readers and writers.

But how? In *The Literacy Studio*, I will reconsider our most basic assumptions about the “traditional” reader's and writer's workshop approach and structure. I will pose even more vexing questions that have caused me to rethink many of my assumptions about reader's workshop and writer's workshop. I will challenge some of the dogma that we often find in packaged programs that provide scripts and walk us through reader's and writer's workshop structures and, spoiler alert, I will argue that we can do much better for children.

In this book, I'll propose an alternative workshop structure, one you can adjust, amend, tinker with. Imagine a literacy block that is flexible enough to allow you to be directly responsive to your kids' needs. We're going to get down to the nitty-gritty detail about planning, scheduling, conferring, differentiating, record keeping, and reflecting so that your students can build their knowledge of reading by writing and vice versa. We'll talk about how to maximize students' choice in how they spend their time—yes, even little kids—and engagement as independent readers and writers.

The Literacy Studio takes teachers and children beyond the workshop structures that we've used for many years by maximizing time for active learning, and because reading and writing instruction is *integrated*, the daily literacy block often comprises just one lesson focusing on reading *and* writing. The Literacy Studio can cut instructional time in half and double its effectiveness. In integrated lessons built on, but not limited to, state standards, students learn to read with an eye to the author, thinking about what the author was up to and how they can use the same tools and strategies in their own work,



Modesta Urbina and Third-Grade Students

and they write with a specific reading audience sitting on their shoulder. They ask: “What do my readers need to think about to understand the message that is so important I’ve chosen to write about it?”

To make these changes is a bit of a daunting prospect, which is why I’ve worked side by side with teachers for years to figure this out in a wide variety of schools. And as you read, it’s important to know that the vast majority of schools in which I work most serve low-income populations. I won’t say that the Literacy Studio as I describe it in this book is perfected, but together we’ve sorted so many of the knottiest (and naughtiest) problems, and this book is all about sharing those solutions. We have learned that we can breathe new life and possibility into the reader’s and writer’s workshop to engage students and meet them where they are, including children who are new to English and students who have learning differences. We’ve developed ways to integrate reading and writing in both instruction and student application, and in so doing, reclaim time for them to work as readers and writers.

Finding time for independent work was the main reason I sat down to refresh our literacy time that snowless week in March years ago. I wanted to know that there was enough time to dig into relevant, differentiated instruction; deep levels of student engagement; and connections between reading and writing that will last a lifetime. I want the same for you and your students.

In a Literacy Studio students work as artists do, in a studio environment focused on work about which they feel passionate, in which they have a hand in setting their own direction, and (most of the time) choice about when and how to read, write, and show their thinking. Like an artist’s studio, it is a bit messy at the beginning, but the new structures open much more time for you and your students. Like artists, students in a Literacy Studio are driven by the habit of revision; in a Literacy Studio, revision is revered. We are lucky to reread, rethink our writing; revising our thinking is a gift!

I’m glad I didn’t get to ski that spring break week. I’m glad I was naive enough to think I could change the whole literacy block in one short week. I’m grateful to the students and colleagues who, that year and every year since, have helped me refine the Literacy Studio. Learning reading and writing together makes sense to kids.