



STORY WORKSHOP

New Possibilities for Young Writers



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Susan Harris MacKay

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CONTENTS

Video Contents *viii*
Online Resource Contents *ix*
Acknowledgments *x*
Prelude *xii*
Introduction *xv*

CHAPTER 1: The Case for Story Workshop 1

What Is Story Workshop? 1
Humans Are Storytellers 3
Stories in School 8
Supporting Children to Grow as Themselves 19
Action Steps: Enrich Your Story
Workshop Practice 26

CHAPTER 2: Preparation 31

What Is Preparation? 31
Preparing Ourselves for Stories:
We Are All Protagonists 36
Preparing the Classroom to Welcome Story 55
Action Steps: Enrich Your Story Workshop
Practice 64

CHAPTER 3: Provocation: Presenting Content to Be Learned 67

What Is Provocation? Telling Is Not Teaching 69
Thinking in Questions 81
Introducing Materials to the Children 85
Action Steps: Enrich Your Story
Workshop Practice 92

CHAPTER 4: Invitation and Negotiation: Setting Expectations and Inviting Children to Create 95

What Is Invitation and Negotiation? 97
Nurturing Empathy and Solidarity Between
Young Writers and Their Teachers 101
Keeping the Head and the Heart Connected 113
Action Steps: Enrich Your Story Workshop Practice 115

CHAPTER 5: Story Creation 119

What Is Story Creation? Exploring the World
in Every Word—or Not 120
Time to Create Stories 123
The Power of the Arts 133
Supporting Children During Story Creation 136
The Power of Play 139
Action Steps: Enrich Your Story Workshop Practice 147

CHAPTER 6: Story Sharing 151

What Is Story Sharing? Learning to Listen 155
Sharing Stories Weaves a Web
of Community and Belonging 166
Action Steps: Enrich Your Story Workshop Practice 177

CHAPTER 7: Living and Learning 179

Stories Create Possibility—and Limit It, Too 180
Joy Is a Result of Challenge and Struggle 187
Works Cited 189

VIDEO CONTENTS



INTRODUCTION

Video 1.1 Kerry, Aeriale, Rosemary, and Melissa in Conversation (p. xxiv)

CHAPTER 1

Video 1.1 Stella Tells a Story (p. 10)

CHAPTER 2

Video 2.1 Preparing the Environment for Stories (p. 31)

Video 2.2 Touring a Classroom Prepared for Stories with Lauren Adams (p. 32)

Video 2.3 Planning for Story Workshop: Team Meeting (p. 42)

CHAPTER 3

Video 3.1 Provocation: Children Ages 5–7 (p. 67)

Video 3.2 Provocation: Children Ages 3–5 (p. 67)

Video 3.3 Introducing Watercolor: Children Ages 5–7 (p. 89)

CHAPTER 4

Video 4.1 Invitation and Negotiation: Children Ages 5–7 (p. 96)

Video 4.2 Invitation and Negotiation: Children Ages 3–5 (p. 96)

Video 4.3 Invitation and Negotiation: Children Ages 6–8 (p. 96)

Video 4.4 Negotiating the Need for New Paper: Children Ages 6–8 (p. 96)

CHAPTER 5

Video 5.1 Story Creation: Children Ages 5–7 (p. 120)

Video 5.2 Kerry and Mead (Age 7) Confer (p. 120)

Video 5.3 Creating Stories with Loose Parts: Children Ages 3–5 (p. 120)

Video 5.4 Everybody Sing: Children Ages 3–5 (p. 120)

Video 5.5 Owen Translates His Story: Children Ages 3–5 (p. 120)

Video 5.6 Creating Recipes: Children Ages 3–5 (p. 120)

CHAPTER 6

Video 6.1 Sharing: Children Ages 5–7 (p. 151)

Video 6.2 Sharing: Children Ages 3–5 (p. 163)

Video 6.3 Sharing: Children Ages 6–8 (p. 163)

Video 6.4 Gray's Lemon Poem: Children Ages 6–8 (p. 163)

CHAPTER 7

Video 7.1 From Sneak Peek to Sharing: Children Ages 3–5 (p. 179)

Video 7.2 Bringing a New Student into Story Workshop: Children Ages 5–7 (p. 179)

See the following page for directions on how to access the videos and online resources.

ONLINE RESOURCE CONTENTS

- 2.1 Yearlong Planning Guidelines
- 2.2 Unit of Study Planning Guidelines
- 2.3 Weekly Intentions Guidelines
- 2.4 Daily Planning Guidelines
- 2.5 Sample First-Day Plan: An Introduction to Materials
- 2.6 Using Documentation to Inform Practice
- 2.7 Considering Classroom Environment
- 3.1 Picture Books and Possible Provocations
- 3.2 Creating Questions Chart
- 4.1 Weekly Memory Keeping Form

How to Access Videos and Online Resources

To access the Online Resources and videos for *Story Workshop*:

1. Go to <http://hein.pub/StoryWorkshop-login>.
2. Log in with your username and password. If you do not already have an account with Heinemann, you will need to create an account.
3. On the Welcome page, choose "Click here to register an Online Resource."
4. Register your product by entering the code: **xxxxxx** (be sure to read and check the acknowledgment box under the keycode).
5. Once you have registered your product, it will appear alphabetically in your account list of My Online Resources.

Note: When returning to Heinemann.com to access your previously registered products, simply log into your Heinemann account and click on "View my registered Online Resources."



PRELUDE

While I am working with another child, I'm suddenly intrigued by what Scouten is doing across the room. In this kindergarten and first-grade classroom, there is a small space between an easel and a bookcase, just big enough for a six-year-old person to turn around. Scouten has found that space to be a convenient location for her to create during story workshop because the bookshelf allows her a spot to place both the tape recorder that will play her music and the clipboard that holds the paper where she'll capture her writing. The space in between gives her the room she needs to dance her way into her story.

I watch her press Play and move to the soft music; then she presses Stop, picks up her pencil, and writes. And then again, and again, until she comes to me, breathless and excited, to read what she has written.

But I'm too impatient to listen to the story. I want to know more about her process and so I ask her to tell me that first. "Scouten, tell me about what you were doing to write that story!"

Scouten looks at me somewhat impatiently but answers, "I started dancing it out and I picked out a song and I wondered what I should do for both the birds and the flowers. But it worked out." And she looks at me intently enough to snap me out of my fascination with how she created her story—and instead listen to her story!

She reads, "First the birds are singing and eating the seeds from the flower. Sang Miss Bird, 'The sky is getting dark.' It began to rain. 'Quickly, go in our nest.' The flowers said, 'Be safe.' And instead of blooming, they started going backwards. When the rain stopped, the flower came up slowly making sure no one was going to pounce on it. Then the bird came out slowly making sure that no hunter was near."

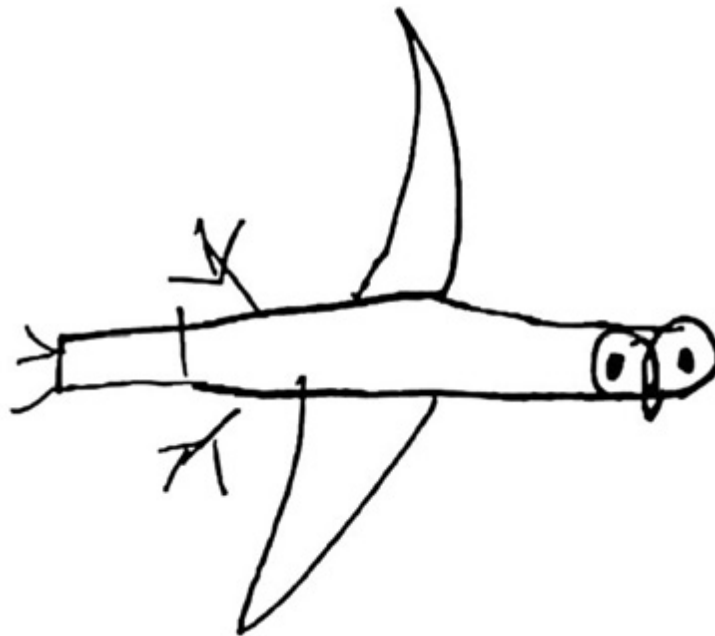
"Wow, Scouten!" I say. "What an exciting story. I love the repetitive language you've used at the end." And, not to be deterred, I add, "How did you come up with that?"

This time, Scouten says nothing but jumps out of her chair and dances a piece of her dance.

Welcome to story workshop. I'm so glad you've stepped into this joyful place to learn alongside children and the many colleagues you'll find, working to make sense of new possibilities to reinvigorate old commitments that support these beliefs and values:

- ✦ Children have a right to write.
- ✦ Children want to write.
- ✦ Children's writing is a way of saying, "Here I am."
- ✦ When children's writing is central to the life of a community of classroom authors, it creates the opportunity for each child to realize "I matter."
- ✦ When children have the opportunity to practice daily the skills and strategies that allow them to exercise their rights to belong in a community where everyone else has the same rights, the result is an indelible sense of agency and empathy that the health of our democracy relies on to survive.

Let's get started!



INTRODUCTION

Story workshop started with a question embraced by teacher-researchers at Opal School, including me and my colleagues. We asked: *What is the connection between literacy and the arts?* Inspired and curious about the rich landscape we expected to find around this intersection, we asked more questions:

- What might be the role of play?
- What happens when we infuse writing workshop with ample use of the arts and time to play?
- How do the voice and the choice that result when we invite children to create and tell their stories lead a classroom to practice the habits of healthy democracy?
- How does this practice, as a first priority, both rely on and reinforce equity and access for all?

Years before I arrived at Opal School, I had become a teacher because I had discovered writing workshop. I didn't expect to want to be a teacher. But when I was a sophomore at Vassar College, I did want to earn the credit available to me if I did some fieldwork off-site and got out of my college classrooms. I signed up to volunteer in a Poughkeepsie public elementary school and was assigned an advisor from Vassar's education department. Who assigned me some books to read. Which annoyed me. I thought that the fieldwork option would be a break from the books. I was so tired of the tedium of my own schooling. But to my great surprise—utter astonishment, really—when I opened the first book, Donald Graves and Virginia Stuart's *Write from the Start: Tapping Your Child's Natural Writing Ability* (1985), which had been published only a few years earlier, I was hooked by page 18. I have such a strong memory of me, lying on my bed in my dorm room, reluctantly opening this book, fully expecting to die of boredom. But instead, I was thrilled, inspired, and literally filled with a new life purpose, which I think is what people

.....
Stories tell you what the truth is. Stories tell you what to believe and tell you how to believe. Stories become a part of you after you listen to them. Stories help you believe.
.....

—Sutton (age 9)

mean when they say they found their calling. Here is some of what I found there that lit the fire that still burns in me:

Our greatest problem is that we underestimate what children can do. We underestimate their will to make sense of themselves and the world around them. Children are curious and want their curiosity satisfied. But we don't know children, nor the interests that arouse their curiosity, nor the learning process well enough to know how to respond to them. We constantly try to trick them into learning things that have nothing to do with them. Most of our classrooms are reflections of what teachers do, not of what children do. If our classrooms are to be effective, they should be filled with stuff, the stuff of what children know and what they want to know more about. (Graves and Stuart 1985, 18)

Story workshop creates a platform for schools to see the will children have to make sense of themselves and their world. Children are invited to satisfy their curiosity and adults see more clearly that they are bursting with it. As story workshops ignite in classrooms around the world, teachers shift classrooms to reflect the children who inhabit them. Story workshop invites teachers who

understand that children learn best through play, but struggle to find a place for it, to infuse it right into literacy instructional time—and they are seeing the explosion of motivation and engagement that happens when they do. Story workshop helps teachers who have practiced writing workshop for a long time, but have been challenged by those students who say they never have anything to write about, find out that all children have stories to tell. Story workshop allows teachers who lament the loss of the arts in the child's school day to find a way to put them to use in new ways that work for everyone.



For more information about this Heinemann resource, visit <http://heinemann.com/products/E12034.aspx>

Though a copy of *Write from the Start* has always been on my bookshelf, I hadn't opened it for over twenty-five years until I was preparing to write this book. For the last eighteen of those years, I've been working at Opal School in Portland, Oregon. Opal School serves 125 three- to eleven-year-old children and their families as well as thousands of educators each year who attend professional development workshops in person or online. Opal was started because the group of developing founders were inspired and challenged by the municipal preprimary schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy. Those founders observed firsthand the sophisticated, articulate, intricate expression of ideas and feelings and theories produced by these very young children.

I wonder to what extent Donald Graves and other writing workshop pioneers were aware of what was happening in Reggio Emilia. On that same page of *Write from the Start*, there is a quote from Gregory Bateson's collection of essays *Mind and Nature*. Graves and Stuart quote Bateson's words: "Break the pattern that connects the items of learning, and you necessarily destroy all quality" (Bateson 2002, 7). When I picked up *Write from the Start* recently, I was startled to find that quote there, in those opening pages of the book that had inspired me to become a teacher. I knew the quote well but had forgotten it in that context. I've become familiar with Bateson's writings and that quote in particular because of how often it is referenced in the writings of philosophers and theorists from Reggio Emilia. In the context of Italian early childhood schools that were built as an anti-fascist effort out of the rubble of the Second World War, a commitment to the patterns and connections of learning had developed. In the context of early literacy in American schools, a commitment to these same patterns had led, at least in part, to an understanding of writing process and the development of writing workshop.

In the first chapter of *Write from the Start*, Graves and Stuart establish a case for writing workshop as a productive response



to an adult mindset that interferes with children’s writing development. That mindset includes assumptions like these:

Most adults think children can’t write until they read . . . Most adults think children can’t write until they successfully complete spelling, punctuation, and grammar exercises . . . Most adults think children can’t write without assignments, pictures, ‘story starters,’ or even word lists to get them going... [and] most adults think children don’t want to write. (Graves and Stuart 1985).

What if the ways in which writing is taught in early childhood classrooms have done more to perpetuate these beliefs than to disrupt them? What if traditional teaching practices create these assumptions, and the children’s responses to them, and it’s not the children themselves? Or their willingness to write? Or their ability to write? How might we create the conditions necessary for us to see something new, so we can rewrite the narrative we tell ourselves about

children and writing? Or about play and learning? Or about the value of the arts?

Graves and Stuart wrote those statements about the beliefs of “most adults” over thirty years ago. To be clear, as I’ve worked directly with thousands of teachers over the last decade, it has not been my experience that most teachers have the same mindset as “most adults.” As we’ve shared the stories of our experiences and research through workshops and publications, we’ve seen story workshop get picked up in places around the world, and we’ve celebrated as we’ve seen the delight and motivation of teachers who are seeing children write and play and share with a level of engagement and productivity they never thought possible. As children become more engaged, it seems, teachers do, too.



But beliefs about the limitations of children held by most adults set in motion expectations about what should happen in school that create tensions that are difficult to navigate for most teachers. Not only are the issues identified by Graves and Stuart still resonant in our culture and society, but we can add even more to the list:

- ✦ Most adults think children (especially some children) have to choose between play and learning at school.
- ✦ Most adults think that the arts in school are expendable and that story is nice but not necessary.
- ✦ Most adults think that children's big emotions distract from the real work of the classroom.
- ✦ Most adults think children (especially some children) won't pass standardized tests if their teachers don't stay on schedule with a scripted curriculum.
- ✦ Most adults spend more energy worrying about where children are going next than they do attending to who they are right now.
- ✦ Most adults don't give enough serious attention to the powerful reciprocity between childhood and adulthood.

Our classrooms reflect the way we look at things. If we want to develop classrooms that reflect what children can do, not only how well they can do what we ask them to do, we need a different approach. Additionally, we need resources that can help us stay grounded in what most teachers really know about children: they are curious and competent communicators who have stories to tell and who want to make connections to the stories other people tell so they can find their place in the human family.

.....
"The children of the future need stories to wonder and learn so that they can be curious. If you're curious, you don't make stereotypes and when you don't make stereotypes, you don't discriminate against other people. Which is good. Because discrimination doesn't make us a happy community."
.....

—Chloe (age 11)



Donald Graves writes,

Children want to write. They want to write the first day they attend school. This is no accident. Before they went to school they marked up walls, pavements, newspapers with crayons, chalk, pens or pencils . . . anything that makes a mark. The child's mark says, "I am."

"No you aren't," say most school approaches to the teaching of writing. We ignore the child's urge to show what he knows. We underestimate the urge because of a lack of understanding of the writing process and what children do in order to control it. Instead, we take the control away from children and place unnecessary road blocks in the way of their intentions. Then we say, "They don't want to write. How can we motivate them?" (Graves 2003, 3)



Graves seems to be arguing the same points that Malaguzzi crafted into his famous poem “The Hundred Languages of Children.” I encourage you to pause right now and find the poem online if it is not familiar to you. Take a moment to read it and reflect on the similarity of concern between Malaguzzi and Graves.

Both authors declare that the child arrives at school already having exercised efforts to make marks on the world—to say, “I am.” The child already knows hundreds of ways to make those marks. The child is learning to talk so he can make his mark through story, in order to make sense of experience and to express it and to find connection and belonging in his own community, wherever he may be.

Things like heads and hearts, reason and dream, or science and imagination are not things that come apart easily for children. It hurts. And what is tragic for us all is the fact that, as hard as they are to take apart, they are even more difficult to get back together again. Break the pattern and destroy the quality.

In Reggio Emilia, as the Second World War ended, and the town had been reduced to rubble, citizens of the community asked, “What can we do to ensure

.....
“You can’t play without thinking.”

—Eli (age 9)
.....



this never happens again?” and “How can we grow a citizenry that will be less likely to destroy itself in the future?” Loris Malaguzzi reflected on this time of hope and imagination and repair in the community by saying, “History can be changed, and is changed by taking possession of it, starting with the destiny of the children” (in Barazzoni 2000, 15). This is the work of teachers. When we are willing to invite the biggest questions we can possibly ask into our classrooms, we can take possession of history by working in solidarity with the destiny of the children.

When we are trying to come up with solutions to big problems, the questions we ask matter. They create the context in which we make decisions. When we aren’t explicitly curious about questions that look beyond skills and compliance, our choices still create a response to those questions. When we relinquish possession of history—when we don’t actively consider the kind of world we are trying to create as we do the work we do—we still make the world. Will it be the one we were hoping for? Teachers who work with young children are in the privileged position of supporting the habits and dispositions and attitudes of the citizenry that will create that world.



Reflection: Asking the Right Questions

What are the biggest questions you are asking as you consider your work with children? What patterns exist between these questions, the work you do with children, and the world you want to see?

If you want to do more, I highly recommend using the resources available from the Right Question Institute (<https://rightquestion.org/>) to organize the development of your big questions with colleagues.



What Can You Expect from This Book?

There are five elements that make up the structure of story workshop: preparation, provocation, invitation and negotiation, story creation, and story sharing. This book is organized around that structure.

In **CHAPTER 1** we'll consider the case for story workshop. What does the research tell us about the importance of play, the arts, and story to the



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Video I.1 Kerry, Aeriale, Rosemary, and Melissa in Conversation.

See page ix on how to access this video.



healthy development of human beings? How does that research inform story workshop practice?

CHAPTER 2 will begin a journey through the structure of story workshop. Preparation is the first element, taking place each day prior to the children's arrival. It includes organizing the space, time, and teacher-research tools to support productive encounters with and between the children.

CHAPTER 3 addresses provocation. We define the daily routine that launches story workshop as a time for teachers to bring a question to children to engage and support their interests and curiosity.

In **CHAPTER 4** we'll explore the element of invitation and negotiation. Here, teachers make agreements with children about how they will spend their time.

CHAPTER 5 focuses on story creation. This is time each day in which children look for, find, invent, and write stories. Children play with materials, talk to each other, and tell and write their stories.

In **CHAPTER 6** the journey leads us to story sharing. Teachers want the work of one creation time to influence the next and for the ideas of children to inspire others in this community of inquirers and authors.

CHAPTER 7 serves as a conclusion to our exploration of the story workshop terrain.

Each chapter includes several features:

- ✦ **Pictures of Practice:** These snapshots give you windows into stories of story workshop in classrooms serving children between the ages of three and eight. This documentation describes the moves of the teachers as they work alongside the children but puts the focus on the work the children are capable of doing when these conditions created by story workshop are present.
- ✦ **Writing Workshop Connections:** These sections articulate the relationship of each element to its writing workshop cousin. We provide this feature to support teachers who are familiar with writing workshop to find connections and to invite relationship.
- ✦ **Try This:** This feature offers teachers new to story workshop ideas for dipping their toes in the practice. Perhaps you'll begin by

considering the role of materials and play during your literacy structures. Perhaps you'll reflect more on the ways in which you document the work of the children and use it to plan for instruction. Or perhaps you'll encourage the children to share their work with one another in new ways. There is no need to try everything at once and no need to follow any strict sequence. There are many ways to start your own journey into story workshop—many small steps you can take, each of which, as long as you are willing to be curious yourself and keep asking big questions, will give you a little more courage to try something more.



Materials Explorations and Reflection

Questions: These sections invite readers to engage with materials and questions. We have found that adults respond in similar ways as children do when they get their hands on materials, and these experiences promote an empathy for the perspective of children. I'll guide you through experiences you can do on your own or in study groups with colleagues. Each chapter includes multiple invitations to reflect on your own practices and to clarify your beliefs, values, hopes, and intentions as an educator.

Action Steps: At the end of each chapter, these steps offer you quick access to tangible suggestions for getting started or support for what to do next.

Educator Interviews: Between chapters, you'll be introduced to educators who have embraced story workshop in settings outside of Opal School. These pieces are excerpts from transcripts of conversations between Kerry Salazar and each educator. We hope you'll enjoy the bonus online video (Video I.1), where you will get a chance to watch Kerry and three of these teachers talk with each other about their approaches. (See the Online Resources for this and other videos.)

Even our youngest students have lots of stories to tell, whether real or imagined.

How can we create entry points for writing, so that all writers feel confident and motivated to share their stories? How can we establish a classroom community of beginning writers where equity, empathy, and compassion become part of the process and vital by-products of story writing?

Enter story workshop, a structure for early literacy that amplifies the relationship between play, art, and writing. Children develop ideas and stories through choices of art materials. By creating images through play, story workshop invites children to explore the “amazingness” (Nisa, age 10) of their ideas in a variety of art forms. “Through their stories,” Susan writes, “students share the meaning they make of their experiences in the world.” Children in every classroom environment feel empowered to transition from play to pencil as they add words to their stories.

Story Workshop includes an abundance of classroom videos, photos, and student samples that illustrate what is possible when children use words, colors, textures, shapes, and all kinds of materials to create the stories they want to tell. Watch how students’ imaginations soar, their love of writing blossoms, and their connections with one another become the focal point of your classroom.



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A teacher for 25 years, Susan Harris MacKay most recently served as Pedagogical Director at Opal School in Portland, Oregon, where the idea of story workshop began in her classroom. As a national speaker, she has inspired thousands of teachers to expand their use of play, the arts, and inquiry to support children’s rights to high quality educational environments upon which our democracy depends.

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