

EDUCATION WEEK TEACHER

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INTERVIEW

Remodeling the Workshop: Lucy Calkins on Writing Instruction Today

By [Anthony Reborá](#)

Lucy Calkins, founding director of the Reading and Writing Project at Teachers College, Columbia University, is one of the most influential literacy educators in the country. She is the author of the popular [Units of Study](#) curriculum guide books and one of the originators of the “workshop” method for reading and writing instruction, which centers on independent student work in combination with teacher modeling and one-on-one and small-group guidance.

While Calkins’ methods have been widely adopted, however, they’ve also come under recent criticism, with some arguing that they [don’t put enough emphasis on direct instruction](#) and [give students too much choice](#) to be compatible with rigorous academic frameworks like the Common Core State Standards.

In a recent interview, we asked Calkins about the role of the workshop model today, particularly in connection with writing instruction. She was joined for conversation by Mary Ehrenworth, the deputy director of the Reading and Writing Project and co-author, with Calkins and Christopher Lehman, of [Pathways to the Common Core: Accelerating Achievement\(Heinemann\)](#). The interview has been edited for space and clarity.

What are the biggest challenges teachers are facing in writing instruction today?

Lucy Calkins: The biggest challenge for teachers is the need for more professional development, the need for more knowledge about the teaching of writing. Expectations for what students should be able to do—and what teachers should be able to do—have skyrocketed. What used to be considered great instruction is no longer enough. In particular, there’s a tremendous emphasis now on teaching a wider variety of writing—including argument writing and informational writing—and on supporting those kinds of writing even in kindergarten and 1st and 2nd grade. And then there’s a tremendous emphasis on transference, so that what kids learn in a writing workshop can to be brought into the writing they do in every discipline.

Mary Ehrenworth: One more really big challenge, especially at the secondary level, is the need for more time for students to write. As teachers gain knowledge of the teaching of writing, many find that they don’t have enough control over their schedules to actually teach writing. In some schools, the schedules are out of the Sputnik era. It is a problem if there is no protected time for kids to actually work on their writing.

What is the best way for teachers to gain the expertise they need to teach writing effectively? Where would you start?

LC: In general, I'd start by putting a higher valuing on high-quality preservice education because teachers are increasingly coming into the profession without strong preservice training, particularly in teaching writing. But there needs to be a greater focus on improving in-service professional development, too. The key is for teachers to be in study groups in their own schools, so that they're planning curriculum together and teaching a shared curriculum and are able to visit each others' classrooms and study student work together. Schools need to become sites for learning to teach writing. It's similar to the way doctors go on rounds and talk about a patient together and discuss what approaches to take. Teachers need to go on rounds together, looking together at a particular child's writing across a few weeks of time, and figuring out the feedback that could help that youngster move forward.

MH: Especially in grades 6 to 12 level, I think it's also important to giving teachers time in PD to work on their own writing. The level of writing that kids are being asked to do today is really high. It's beautiful but really challenging. And not every teacher has done that level of writing.

LC: And not just in grades 6 to 12. The skill levels that are being required of all kids—being able to weigh multiple sources and integrate them into an argument, for example—are demanding. For kids to be able to get there, teachers need to have had important experiences doing that kind of work themselves so they develop a sense for what's involved. And that ultimately means teachers having opportunities to work on their own writing. They need these experiences and skills in order to be able to give detailed explicit instruction. Teaching kids to write isn't just something where you can turn down the lights, turn on the music, and say, "Write!" It takes really clear strategy instruction to lift the level of students' writing.. That requires knowledge—and also an understanding that teaching writing is a lot like teaching tennis or soccer, where you demonstrate, and then the kids go about their work, and then you coach.

When you refer to changing expectations, I assume you're referring to the common core. Has your workshop model been modified to adapt these changes? How have you changed your training in the past few years?

LC: First of all, the common core emphasizes an equal division between narrative, informative, and argument writing, and we have really embraced that, and that has led us to some deep thinking particularly about argument, which was new for us. So we partnered with a group at ETS [Educational Testing Service] that has been studying argumentative writing for decades. Ultimately, we've developed a trajectory of work on argument writing starting in kindergarten and continuing through secondary school—with students in early grades writing persuasive speeches about how they could make their school a better place, or writing reviews about their favorite pizza shop or ice cream flavor, and then moving on to writing about their reading. By 5th grade, students are writing some very sophisticated research-based position papers that involve critical reading and the use of sources. We've also give similar attention to a trajectory of

development in information writing, and of course help students to do that writing not just in ELA but also in other subjects.

People have often associated the writing-workshop model with more an emphasis the personal narrative style. Is that inaccurate?

MH: That's one of the things that personally makes us crazy. People who say that about the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project are looking at our work from 20 years ago. Yes, 20 years ago many of us were more focused on personal narrative and poetry in classrooms, and the reason for that is that at the time, there was almost no writing in schools happening at all. So the first emphasis was to teach kids to tell their own stories. But in the last decade, narrative writing has become maybe a quarter of our curriculum.

LC: It is true that we have reputation for having a sort of "Kumbaya" approach. But keep in mind, I've been doing this work for 30 years. I was part of the first National Institute of Education study ever done on young kids as writers. And yes, it's true that that study prioritized kids writing their own stories. And we still think that's important. But the work has evolved over the 30 years. In the Units of Study curriculum that we are especially known for, there is an equal divisions between information, narrative, and argument writing.

So philosophically, as educators, do you support the shifts in writing instruction that the common core poses?

LC: Yes, sure. But remember, the common core says that a third of kids' writing should be narrative. That's still a lot of time focused on narrative writing. So it's a mistake to represent the common core as saying that kids need to work only on argument and information writing. We think narrative gives kids experiences with deliberately crafting stories in ways that create specific effects, and we think that work is not only important for their writing development but also transforms how they read. The question, "Why did the author start the story this way?" makes sense if kids themselves are accustomed to deliberately crafting their own narratives so as to accomplish particular goals—to advance a theme, to create a mood. The common core expects kids to read with an awareness of why might the author have done this or that—with a consciousness that literature is written on purpose, to create an effect. So, the other thing that people sometimes get wrong about us is thinking that our work in narrative is somehow less than rigorous. It is important to teach kids to pay attention to deliberately crafting a text in ways that create particular effects, and to help them use techniques to accomplish specific goals. We want our writers to be able to read literature with a consciousness of craft and then to be able emulate some of what they notice the writer has done.

So how is reading integrated into writing instruction in the workshop model that you're encouraging?

LC: A variety of ways. One of the most important ways to get better at writing is to study exemplar texts. So in our writing curriculum, there isn't a single writing unit in which the kids are not also reading, closely reading, mentor texts. Every unit has a couple of texts that kids read and reread and turn inside-out, returning to those texts many times. Kids work to figure out how the author made those texts and what can we learn from them.

The second connection between reading and writing is that it is also important for kids to learn to write literary essays about specific texts. In our framework, there is a unit on writing about reading in 2nd grade and after that, for pretty much every grade, there is a unit on teaching kids to write literary essays—interpretive essays, compare-and-contrast essays, thematic essays. Kids need to learn to advance an idea about a text, to select passages that support the idea, and rank which passages provide the best support. They also need to study literature to notice not only what the author has said but also how, in the use of figurative language, literary devices, symbolism. Of course, writing about texts crosses over to other content areas, too—kids also need to learn to write about nonfiction texts in social studies, for example.

In your book *Pathways to the Common Core*, you warn teachers against going back to traditional instructional strategies, especially in the context of teaching argumentative writing. What do you mean by that?

MH: It makes us anxious when you have a teacher who has 35 kids in a class—multiplied by five sections across the day so 125 kids in all—and who has all the kids writing the same essay. We’re talking about the old approach where the teacher gives students a theme and expects them all to collect evidence for that theme. In this sort of assignment, kids are supposed to be compliant writers, and all they’re doing is flipping through the pages of a text looking for evidence of the teacher’s idea. The common core can be misunderstood in ways that lead teachers to feel like they have to go back to that.

LC: We prefer to think of a writing classroom—a writing workshop—as resembling a painter’s studio or a potter’s workshop. So the teacher, who’s a potter him- or herself, gathers the students together to show them how to add a new glaze, say, and then the kids go to their stations and work on their pots, while the teacher walks among them, teaching one-to-one and in small groups. The old-fashioned way of teaching writing was where the teacher—who was not a writer—would just sort of say, “At home tonight write an essay and make sure it does these eight things. Bring it in tomorrow and I’ll correct it.” In a writing workshop, a lot of actual writing happens in the classroom and right then and there, teachers give feedback and kids give each other feedback, too. Revision often begins before a draft is completed. There’s more of an emphasis on teaching in the midst of writing.

In the case of students who are lacking basic literacy skills, who are below grade level or new to English, where can teachers start in teaching writing skills?

LC: One of the important things to understand is that if teachers are knowledgeable about how kids develop as writers, they can adjust their strategies to support students’ development, starting wherever kids are in that trajectory. That includes by working with or consulting with teachers of younger grades. For example, when kids are younger, they often sketch for a minute before writing, and they often say aloud the words they intend to write, drafting and revising the text orally before writing anything. That’s something that works beautifully with older English-language learners, too. If, say, a 5th grader who is new to English draws what he intends to write on a page and labels many items in that drawing, this gives him a little personal dictionary to draw upon when writing. So that’s a

technique that 2nd grade teachers use all the time, and that actually can be useful to 5th grade teachers who are working with students in the early stages of language acquisition. These are the kinds of connections can happen when writing instruction is shared by a whole school.

In *Pathways to the Common Core*, you mention being involved in a previous standards-development effort that included poetry as one of the recommended types of writing for students. Are you disappointed that there's not much of a focus on poetry writing in the common core?

LC: I don't think that in practice, the Common Core has marginalized poetry as much as you might think. With the spotlight on close reading, there's still a lot of focus on reading poetry. Because poems are short and complex, they invite close reading and interpretation.

But I think you're absolutely right that there is probably less of a focus on writing poetry in some schools—though that's not true for the schools in which our project is involved because most of the teachers with whom we work do teach a unit of study on poetry writing. It's such a beautiful thing to teach. Because of its condensed nature, poetry provides a perfect forum for teaching revision.

MH: And when you think about English-language learners, there's something about poetry that makes it the most rewarding unit for them because a student can use fewer words and yet use words in interesting ways to do important work. Sometimes our more endangered writers, our more reluctant writers, come out the woods with poetry. And so teachers have held on to that. It's important to remember that there's the common core and then there's what teachers know about effective practice, and hopefully those coincide in most ways but sometimes they don't. It's important for teachers to hold onto what they know matters. I think most of us know that this country needs more Langston Hugheses.

LC: Poetry is also the genre that we turn to at life's most important moments—it's what we use at a wedding or a funeral. And classrooms are communities. The writing workshop asks teachers to think about their class as a community. So poetry is alive and well because it's how many classroom communities begin their week, it's how they end their week. It's how the death of a class pet is marked, or the ending of a book is noted. It's how teachers make moments memorable.