

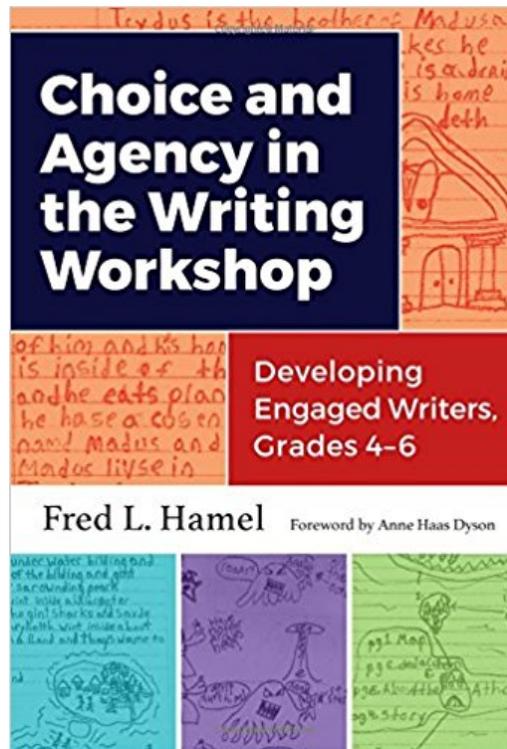
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## Review of *Choice and Agency in the Writing Workshop: Developing Engaged Writers, Grades 4-6*

By Fred L. Hamel

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With *Choice and Agency in the Writing Workshop: Developing Engaged Writers, grades 4-6*, Fred L. Hamel invites readers to observe a writing workshop in action, think deeply about writing workshop, and imagine how they can respond to student writers in generative ways. In addition to sharing about what works in this kind of instruction, Hamel also explores tensions that educators might experience within a workshop context.

### **Chapter 1: Initiating a New Writing Environment**

In chapter 1, Hamel orients the reader to Mr. Allegro's class and his version of writing workshop by describing both practicalities and theoretical foundations of how this specific community worked. Mr. Allegro and Hamel crafted a workshop, based in social constructivism, that opened up possibilities for different writing products based in play and experimentation. They moved away from the idea that writing instruction is meant to promote academic literacies and toward the idea that literacy practices should be concerned with "living life in the ongoing present, forming relations and connections across signs, objects, and bodies in often unexpected ways" (Leander & Bolt, 2012, p. 22). This appreciation for the new, immediately meaningful, and unexpected ways that the young writers in this fourth-grade workshop engaged in the work of crafting texts is woven throughout each chapter.

After reviewing these theoretical perspectives, Hamel returns to the practicalities of the class. The writing workshop in Mr. Allegro's class aligned with widely held conceptions of how a workshop class runs (Calkins, 1994; Graves, 1983, Ray & Laminack, 2001) in terms of providing student choice about topics, dedicating extended time to writing, providing mini-lessons on specific writerly moves, including opportunities to talk about writing,

allowing students their writing with classmates, and structuring the workshop to provide flexibility within clear goals and processes. However, Hamel argues that the power of the workshop he describes also comes from the interactions between not just teacher and students, but young writers and their peers. These relationships lead to the crucial values of writing workshops that Hamel weaves throughout every chapter: curricular responsiveness and instructional flexibility, writer experimentation, and adult awareness and appreciation of students' growth and development.

Hamel often returns to his position as a parent volunteer and how this role enabled him to engage in open and appreciative readings of students and their writing, leading him to advocate for taking on a *listening stance* when engaging with young writers and their work. Hamel describes the listening stance as being in opposition to the more traditional standards and assessment stance where teachers specify the topic and structure of student writing. It further allows teachers to undertake generous readings of the work that they see young people doing. This listening stance guides the structure of the following chapters, where Hamel develops themes around student-centered narratives of his experiences with students in the class.

### **Chapter 2: Writing as Visualizing Popular Worlds**

Hamel highlights the students' use of visualization, multimodality, imagination, and references to popular culture such as video games and T.V. shows. He marvels at how when given choice, young writers often wrote about worlds or characters represented in media rather than about their own life experiences. Hamel shares how these approaches to

composing were very different from the ones he was oriented to in his teacher preparation program, like personal narratives and persuasive essays (see, e.g., Hillocks, 2007, 2011). He is also upfront about how writing based on pop culture led to tensions for the adults supporting the young writers, since drawing or riffing off pop culture is often viewed as being outside the realm of academic or serious writing practices. Hamel argues for a shift toward valuing engagement, flexibility, and student choice such that pop culture becomes a legitimate source and topic for composing in school. He observes that students, who may be less comfortable with the kinds of writing practices traditionally valued in schools, may prefer graphic representations of popular worlds, which in turn provided engaging entry points for composing texts.

Hamel models how an adult can approach student work generously, even if it is initially hard for adults to comprehend, as they try to figure out the student's purpose, goal, and needs with their compositions. He engages the listening stance to show how to make sense of student's work and how visual composing is a powerful practice that makes writing accessible and purposeful to students who may not engage in a writing workshop otherwise.

### **Chapter 3: Conferencing and Literacy Desiring**

In chapter 3, Hamel takes on the topic of conferencing, which in writing workshop professional development is often talked about in terms of its value and challenge. Rather than describing the architecture of these instructional opportunities, he digs into a crucial tension in the practice: the fact that adults engaging in writing conferences with student writers often (un)consciously take control of the student's writing and offer advice

to students based on needs that the adult perceives in the student, which may not be aligned with student goals.

Arguing for adults to become better listeners attuned to purposes of the young writers they are supporting, Hamel introduces the concept of *literacy desiring*, which he describes as “the holistic, in-the-moment, full-bodied ways in which students are drawn into and energized by a range of textual engagements” (p. 53). Woven into the act of conferencing, literacy desiring helps teachers respectfully begin with the idea that young writers are already working agentively with and in the texts they are composing, and adults should enter into the act of supporting the writer aligned with their purposes and motivations.

Hamel shows how, during a writing conference, he offered advice that conflicted with the goals of the students he was hoping to support. However, once he aligned himself with their momentum and released his own vision for their piece, he better met the needs of the writers, appreciated their work, and saw how each of their choices was meaningful. Hamel uses the concept of literacy desiring to help readers think about conference dynamics and recognize whose expertise matters: Who sets the agenda, and how should adults help young writers keep working on their pieces?

### **Chapter 4: How Relationships Influence Writing and Writing Influences Relationships**

Returning to the thread of relationships in the writing workshop and reiterating that relationships are just as important as the writing process or publication, Hamel invites readers to better understand how “students used the workshop to *do things* relationally with writing and through writing” (p. 69; emphasis in

original). Chapter 4 is organized into scenes in which the young writers work with others throughout the composing of their texts and how this contributes to their writer identities.

Across several narratives, Hamel relates how the structure of the writing workshop is significant because it both requires and enables students to make connections with others and engage in the potentially risky and vulnerable activity of inviting another to read and respond to their work. Other experiences of relational risk come when a publication of work written in dramatic genres, like a dialogue, requires enlisting peers in the practice and performance of the work. Through this process, the writer has the opportunity to practice reaching out to others, garnering support, and developing resilience if things don't work out in the way they'd planned.

Students in Mr. Allegro's class also had the opportunity to work in writing partnerships, which were enmeshed in a whole different set of dynamic social relationships. Writing in collaboration required that each young person negotiate power, control, voice, and status in the writing relationship. Sometimes, as Hamel observes, these negotiations can organically give rise to new forms of functional writing, like contracts, that rebalance the relationship.

In concluding this chapter, Hamel explores how the writing workshop enables observers to see the social dynamics of the classroom and how relationships are woven throughout writing processes. He argues that teachers need to value and make use of social dynamics in the writing curriculum. Not only do relationships lead to engagement and motivation for writing, they expand possibilities for teaching about writing processes and for building a classroom community.

## Chapter 5: Sharing and Publishing

Chapter 5 focuses on another staple of the writing workshop classroom: publication, and how writer identities grow as they share the written product with a real audience and getting their feedback. In Mr. Allegro's classroom writing was published or made available to an audience in many different ways: during share time at the end of each workshop, through read-alouds or performance, and through producing an artifact that is displayed in the classroom. After describing how publication unfolded in Mr. Allegro's classroom, Hamel explores some of the tensions that often don't get talked about in writing workshop conversations. He acknowledges that sometimes publishing is an adult-controlled activity, and describes how he and Mr. Allegro worked hard to make sure that it was student-driven and authentically supported the growth of their writer identities. In this space, students were able to shape the publication opportunities in ways that made the risk-taking feel possible so that their writing was seen, heard, read, admired, and valued, even if it meant that they needed to work through the complexities of taking the risk of showing their work.

Across several narratives, Hamel shows how publishing was able to motivate young writers. For some, the concept of publishing and community recognition was enough to move students purposefully through their writing process. For others, although they were proud of their work, they only wanted to share it with a select few readers as they moved throughout their drafting, revising, and editing. And finally, some saw how important publishing was to the classroom learning community and wanted to produce something for the classroom library, which was honored by the teacher and class.

Hamel also addresses the argument that publication can be stressful for writers. He argues that, when skillfully orchestrated, publication's benefits can be worth the feelings of risk. Student's experience of publication is often influenced by the ways in which the adults position student work and model appreciative responses that are inclusive of all best efforts. In Mr. Allegro's classroom publication could be a way of bringing students into the learning community and an essential way for honoring diversity of interests, languages, and ways of writing.

### **Chapter 6: Shaping the Writing Curriculum Together**

Hamel looks at whole class interactions to think through and describe how the writing workshop is a structure that opens up spaces for students to have agency in shaping the writing curriculum. In Mr. Allegro's classroom students challenged concepts, such as plot structure, and revised how they were taught based on their own experiences with composing texts. This experience opened up space in the curriculum for students to make sense of a writing element in their own ways, which according to Hamel, was made possible because of the writing workshop structure that fostered flexibility, experimentation, and agency.

In a different instance where adults were uncomfortable about the mature content in a piece shared by a young writer, the students were allowed to enter the conversation, which if left to adults, may have led to censorship. This discussion, while likely challenging for all the parties involved, opened up space for the class to think about how writing matters and how it affects readers. Hamel asserts that these kinds of conversations, based in trust potentially fostered in a writing workshop, about the ethics

and effects of writing make space for students to think about how they impact their audience.

### **Chapter 7: Developing Children as Writers**

In the final chapter, Hamel steps back to reflect on the overall effect of the writing workshop and to explore how the composing practices of students, the teaching practices of Mr. Allegro, and the listening practices that he modeled might offer up implications for other teachers. He reflects on a comment that implies that the writing workshop may not be rigorous because the writers were able to act young. He challenges this presumption, arguing that in this writing workshop community "kids can still find ways to 'be kids' in school, or, more specifically, that they are able to *become literate as kids* rather than simply as prototypes of high school students or adults" (p. 120; emphasis in original). This point connects back to the concepts Hamel introduced earlier like the listening stance and literacy desiring, because it suggests that the work that young writers are doing is serving them in the moment.

Hamel advocates for the power of the ideas, stances, and mindsets shown in Mr. Allegro's class. He argues that teaching in a writer's workshop tradition potentially changes how teachers understand learning and writing. This setting decenters teacher expertise and leads to an appreciation of what students are already trying and doing with their work. This decentering in turn helps to grow teacher knowledge. Similarly, he refers to the narratives shared in earlier chapters to demonstrate that by valuing how students are engaging in writing practice, teachers approach writing instruction more organically. In this kind of writing workshop environment, Hamel argues that writers can go beyond what is expected of them based on their grade level. Finally, he reminds readers that the writing workshop requires

teachers to be deeply present with their young writers and become active kid-watchers in order to be flexible and responsive to support students' agency. This attentive listening, in his eyes, becomes not only a powerful teaching tool, but also an ethical imperative for teachers who want to support their students' growth as writers.

### Response

Reading through *Choice and Agency in the Writing Workshop*, I made many annotations of affirmation and agreement in the margins. The ideas, observations, and arguments that Hamel offered resonated with the other texts on the writing workshop model that I have used to inform my own practice, while offering new language or theories to support the practice. However, in his reconsidering of the ideas that student choice is good and that if teachers trust students to write about things they care about then they will be more engaged, Hamel often appears to be preaching to the choir and addressing readers who are already invested in writing workshop. If this is case, then there seems to be some conflict with how the author envisioned the intended audience. If the text is hoping to inspire pre- and in-service teachers who are not already practitioners of workshops, then more is needed to help readers envision how they might bring these practices into their writing instruction.

However, the structure of the book around unconventional themes makes this volume different from others on the workshop concept

and suggests a different audience, one that is in between new and experienced workshop teachers.

Hamel's willingness to directly address areas of the writing workshop that may cause discomfort or tension in adult practitioners feels novel when placed next to a shelf of other texts that are selling you this enchanting approach to growing strong writers. Perhaps these teachers are like Mr. Allegro, who writes in the Afterword that he was interested in the writing workshop concept, but was initially apprehensive about trying it out in a context with curriculum mandates and expectations. It may be that instead of introducing teachers to the writing workshop concept, this text is really intended for teachers who are intrigued or maybe have even tried a writing workshop briefly, but are nervous about how it might unfold in their communities. If that's the case, then this text may fill a necessary gap in workshop texts.

Often writing workshop is presented as a way to remedy writing instruction that is plagued with meaningless assignments and disenfranchised students; however, sharing interactions where things did not go as planned and required complex negotiations between adults and young writers seems to normalize these difficulties. The listening stance and concept of literacy desiring, alongside narratives that model teacher flexibility and appreciation of student work may offer those interested in the workshop model the nudge they need to try it out.

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