

Videotape Introduction: *An Effective Writing Workshop Minilesson*

This video clip reflects a yearlong study of writing workshop in a kindergarten classroom. Christine, the kindergarten teacher, not only conducts a daily writing workshop but also planned for the writing curriculum in advance - creating a *curriculum calendar*. A *curriculum calendar* details a year of teaching. Usually, a curriculum calendar is organized by the months of the school year and consists of between eight and fifteen units of study. These studies are varied; that is the teacher includes some genre units of study (such as nonfiction), some process units of study (such as partnerships), and some craft units of study (such as author studies). *Curriculum calendars* usually include some longer units of study (four, five, or six weeks) alongside shorter units (one, two, or three weeks).

In this kindergarten class the *curriculum calendar* that Christine developed included a variety of *units of study*. A *unit of study* is a road map for what will be taught over a period of time, usually between two and six weeks, in the writing workshop. During a unit of study, students go through the steps of the writing process. Some of these steps are rehearsal, drafting, revising, editing and publishing. Some of the units these kindergarteners have gone through include launching the writing workshop, several small moment units, a revision unit, a pattern/list book unit, a nonfiction unit (i.e. how to and all about books), a poetry unit and are finishing the year with a realistic fiction unit which is reflected in the attached videotape clip.

As with any unit of study in writing, this kindergarten realistic fiction unit began with the *immersion* phase. *Immersion* is a period of time, typically ranging from two to five days in length, when students, rather than writing, are saturated with the genre or topic being studied. The purpose of immersion is for students to notice how a particular type of text is written. This is often referred to as *craft*. After noticing these, students are encouraged to try these very same techniques when writing their own texts.

When planning a unit of study, a teacher often selects and uses *touchstone texts*. *Touchstone texts* are pieces of literature that the students know and love and then are used throughout a unit of study as another way of teaching craft. A teacher considers the unit objectives and minilesson teaching points when choosing which texts to use as *touchstone texts*. A

teacher then reads the selected touchstone texts to students over and over during read aloud and refers to them during the workshop minilessons. For the realistic fiction unit, Christine chose several texts by Ezra Jack Keats as her touchstone texts. Keats is an excellent choice because his books are realistic, focus on a single character across texts (i.e. Peter, Jennie), and describe everyday problems that children can relate to. Christine used *Peter's Chair*, *A Letter for Amy*, *Snowy Day* and *Goggles* since they all center around the main character Peter. Reading aloud several stories about one character is important, since students will be expected to write many stories about a single character during this unit.

In the minilesson captured on the videotape it is evident that the class had recently ended the immersion phase and in the previous day's writing workshop focused on the rehearsal phase of the writing process - during which students created a character which they recorded (sketched and labeled) on their character planning sheets. Students can be seen using their character planning sheet in this day's lesson as a way to orally rehearse the story they will write. (This video captures the first day of students writing realistic fiction pieces.)

During the day's minilesson, Christine demonstrates for students that they will (1) rehearse their story by saying the story across their fingers, (2) touch each page and say what they will write on that page, (3) sketch each part of their story and (4) write the text. These rehearsal strategies are familiar to students because they practiced them in previous units of study and therefore, Christine is able to review and model all of them quickly and set the expectation that students will rehearse and draft an entire story during that day's writing workshop. As a way to scaffold students in planning out their stories, Christine has created three page booklets. In the narrative units earlier in the year, students used this structure (three page booklet) when starting to write their pieces as a way to help them include a beginning (page 1), middle (page 2) and ending (page 3). In realistic fiction, this scaffold is initially helpful to students in understanding how to introduce the character (page 1), build up and describe the problem (page 2) and include the solution (page 3). As students become familiar with the genre structure, a teacher may create four and five page booklets for students as well as have single sheets of writing paper available for students to add to any length booklet.

While viewing the tape, it is important to pay special attention to the minilesson architecture that Christine follows and which makes her lesson clear, economical and supportive of different learning styles and writing developmental abilities. It is important to note that throughout the minilesson, Christine is consistently and purposefully drawing students attention to strategies being taught by repeatedly using the phrases "Watch me as I..." and "Did you notice.."

Christine's minilesson lasts 7 minutes and an effective minilesson ranges from 5-10 minutes. Christine is able to do an enormous amount in this time, because she has established effective classroom management routines, she is building on strategies taught in previous units and she is tightly following the minilesson architecture.

The active engagement phase of the minilesson, which typically spans from 1-3 minutes, is a critical component of the minilesson because it gives students the opportunity to try what they have just seen demonstrated by the teacher. In this kindergarten class, Christine has paired up students (by distributing color coded, laminated paper hands which she refers to as "sharing hands") so that they know whom to turn and talk to each day during the active engagement. By having students know whom to turn and talk to, this time is used effectively.

During the active engagement portion of the minilesson, Christine circulates around the carpet and listens in on several partnerships as both a way to quickly assess if students are capable of demonstrating the strategy as well as a way to keep students engaged. A teacher, for example, may notice that students are struggling with the strategy at hand and decide to modify the remainder of the minilesson. On the other hand if the teacher notices that only a few students are struggling with the strategy, she may decide to gather those students for small group work immediately following the minilesson.

At the end of the active engagement, you will notice Christine chooses a student who is able to model the strategy learned proficiently. A teacher might also use this opportunity to simply name out the strategies she noticed turn and talk partners using rather than have a student share. The

teaching point of the minilesson will help a teacher determine which method best suits a particular minilesson.

Because Christine has writing workshop every day in her classroom, her students have developed exemplary writing habits. The writing workshop routines and expectations are apparent when visiting the classroom. Following the minilesson, for example, Christine sends the students off for independent writing. She uses a timer each day to set and share the independent writing goal (number of minutes). By June, her students have developed an impressive stamina of writing independently for twenty-five minutes. While her students are writing Christine circulates and has one on one conferences. On this particular day, Christine was able to lead six conferences while her students worked independently. In order to make her conferences focused and productive, Christine wears her "working necklace", which signals to students that she is not to be interrupted.

While conferring, Christine, carefully selects one or two students to share during the share session of the workshop. Christine use the share, which ranges from three to five minutes, as a teaching opportunity. For example, she highlights particular strategies a student writer has tried in his/her piece. She also encourage students to respond to one another's writing during this time with specific compliments such as, "I like the way you showed how the character was feeling by making his face look angry" or by asking questions for clarity or elaboration such as, "Could you tell us more about that part?" The writer can then decide what (if any) suggestions he/she will use when revising the piece during the next day's writing workshop.

In addition to the videotape, there are several other attachments which can be viewed as a way to learn more about the workshop model including the minilesson, conferring and share.