A Conversation with Elyse Eidman-Aadahl of the National Writing Project

By Elyse Eidman-Aadahl | Categories: Interviews, Being a Writer, Thought Leadership

Collaborative Classroom: We're excited to speak with you today. Let's start by talking about the National Writing Project. Tell us about the organization's mission, how you work, and how educators can get involved.

Elyse Eidman-Aadahl: At the National Writing Project, we envision a future where every person is an accomplished writer and engaged learner. We are teachers, university faculty, researchers, writers and journalists, librarians, and community educators who are working to advance writing.

Specifically, we advance writing by growing and sustaining nationally networked local communities of expertise in the teaching of writing. In all, we have 175 Writing Project sites housed on college campuses throughout the United States, and these sites prepare 2,000 new teacher-leaders each year. We also work with current classroom teachers, putting their knowledge to work to improve the teaching of writing, providing professional learning opportunities, and hosting online communities of practice.

Many teachers can find a local NWP site and, for those not living close to one, we have a lot of online support through social media and online events. The best way to hear about our events is through our Write Now email newsletter. People can sign up for the newsletter at nwp.org.
Collaborative Classroom: When educators engage with the NWP, what will they discover? What might surprise them?

Elyse Eidman-Aadahl: What teachers will find online or at local NWP sites is a community of educators who are passionate about writing and the teaching of writing. And they come from all levels and subject areas. The Writing Project community is big and diverse, so people can always find others with their particular interests, whether that’s teaching writing in a writer’s workshop or writing in science or using writing in the community for civic action.

We have a very broad view of writing because there are always new forms and new contexts in which to write. Think of all the new forms of writing that have come into being during just the last few decades due to technology and the internet: blogs, emails, podcasts, and so on. There’s always something new in writing.

Something that might surprise those who are newcomers to our work is that we strongly believe in the importance of becoming a writer yourself. Our NWP programs tend to focus on teaching writing, of course, but a lot of what we do at our local sites is to write ourselves. We think that when we are writers ourselves and we’re wrestling with what it means to be a writer, that experience brings a level of nuance and understanding to our teaching of writing.

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One of the things I love about our partnership with Collaborative Classroom and about its Being a Writer curriculum is the emphasis that Being a Writer places on the teacher as writer and the act of teachers writing alongside their students. So, we would invite all teachers using the Being a Writer program to seek out a local NWP site or join our national online community to become part of a community of writers themselves.

Collaborative Classroom: When considering K–6 writing instruction in general, what do you believe is most important? What guides your thinking?

Elyse Eidman-Aadahl: When considering instruction, I think there are a few things that are very important to understand first about writing. Number one is that writing is something we make. Although we have maker movements in areas such as STEM, often people forget that writing is an act of making something Therefore everything we know about “making” applies. It’s a chance to be creative, to be independent, to carry through something that is ours, to make a contribution to the community. Looking through this lens of writing as making, when we are teaching and coaching young writers, we have a perfect opportunity to guide them in becoming reflective, self-managing, and independent learners.

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The realization that writing is making also helps us clarify what the work is in a writer’s workshop. Like all making, writing is a process. We need to dispel the idea that what we write comes out perfectly the first time. Instead we must embrace the process. It begins as
we imagine what we want to write. Then we write a little, we revise it, we write a bit more, and we make it better, just like we do with all the things we make. Writing is making, and human beings love making!

Next, I would hope that all elementary students get a chance to see how writing is a tool for thinking and learning, something that will be useful across their whole lives. We use it in a million ways: to plan, to keep track of things, to organize content, to reflect on our lives. A lot of this is writing that we do for ourselves, for our own purposes. It's low stakes or no stakes. It's done informally in a notebook or journal.

It's important for students to understand that writing is something we can use for ourselves, including managing our emotional lives. That might be especially important now as so many of us are in remote, online, or hybrid learning situations. We're asking students to be a little more planful and self-managing, and writing is a tool for doing that. I'd encourage teachers to really emphasize and welcome all these uses of writing.

**Collaborative Classroom: What do you think is essential for writers in grades K–2?**

**Elyse Eidman-Aadahl:** Our youngest students are learning how language works, including language that is spoken and language that is in print and graphics. Writing is another window into understanding language. We learn by drawing and then explaining our drawing to others and then working to link the sound-spelling patterns to our explanations. Drawing and writing go hand in hand for our very youngest learners who are learning to move between spoken language and representations of language.

In addition, teacher modeling of the writing process is key for our youngest writers. The teacher shows students how to write, revise, and edit pieces. Drawings can also be revised! Since we are teaching our students that writing is communication, we need to try out our writing on others, listen to our audience, and revise when we get feedback. We want K–2 students to see that process of making and understand it as normal.

Mainly, our youngest students need to understand and practice that we all “read writing” and we “write what people will read.” We want them to understand that everything we read was created by a person just like them. Keeping the writer at the center of instruction helps students to see themselves as writers as well.

**Collaborative Classroom: And what would you say is important for upper-elementary students?**

**Elyse Eidman-Aadahl:** For our older elementary writers, we can build from the strong foundation of writing from K–2. Content, genre, and mentor texts are essential for this age group. Older writers begin to expand their knowledge of the world, and therefore their writing expands as well. These students need to write across the disciplines, explore their own learning through writing, as well as explore their interests.
In addition, through the use of mentor texts, students can try out different techniques using published authors as their model. Another writer can give us insight into the different ways we can write, and if students come to understand that they can always look to other writing as a source of ideas for their own writing, they will have learned a very useful life skill.

Lastly, I would say that writing for an authentic audience and understanding who that audience is are both essential for grades 3–5. These upper-elementary students can reach a larger and more distant audience than students in earlier grades. So much of learning to write comes from learning how your writing comes across to an audience, what they understand or get confused by, what made an impression on them, or where they got lost. Reading our own writing from the perspective of an audience is a vital but very challenging skill that is learned most effectively when we actually get to write for an authentic audience.

When students publish their work for a real audience, this is a great place to introduce the idea of editing for “correctness.” Grammar and conventions are essential aspects of the writing process, yet the research literature is clear that instruction in those areas happens best in context—right when the students have a need to ensure proper spelling and punctuation and care about getting it right.

Collaborative Classroom: These skills seem so important, and yet writing often gets less attention than reading in the approach to English Language Arts instruction. In fact, a lot of writing instruction is heavily focused on writing in response to reading. How does this impact writing? What are the benefits for students in moving beyond writing in response to a prompt?

Elyse Eidman-Aadahl: One of the most significant impacts of instruction that’s centered on “writing in response to reading” is that this approach narrows writing to short-answer or constructed responses in the reading program. It may seem as if the students are doing a lot of writing, but the writing they are doing is mostly just a comprehension check based on response to a passage they have been given. If this is the majority of writing that students are doing, then there are a wide range of writing experiences they are not having: generating their own ideas for writing, writing more substantive genres, doing their own research and writing about that.
A big part of learning to write is learning what to do when you face the blank page—when you are generating your own topic and question, rather than just responding to a question that was given to you. Every child has questions and a desire to learn.

Children also bring enormous funds of knowledge. If our children aren't writing about something they choose, a topic in which they have the ability to be an authority, they aren't learning the full aspects of what it means to write. It is an error and a huge missed opportunity if students end up thinking, "Only after I read, I write."

Collaborative Classroom: Written communication—especially in today's digital world—is everywhere. Why might teachers think differently about placing equal importance on writing?

Elyse Eidman-Aadahl: Well, you're right that writing happens everywhere. Writing as a skill is a huge gatekeeper and advancer for people. In the workplace and in higher education, writing skills are essential to success.

But it's not just about writing in the future world of college and work. Kids are already publishing and writing in multiple forms on the internet. As we look at social media or online games, kids are constantly making things and publishing. The challenge is that there is often no link for most kids between what they are learning in school and what they are publishing right now in the world.

If we as educators can make this link, this is a powerful opportunity to support students in understanding the responsibility of being an author. Knowledge, authority, and ethics are parts of being an author. It's a way of showing students that they matter and their thoughts matter.

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Collaborative Classroom: How might teachers balance the need for teaching students to respond to a prompt and perform well on tests with the need to offer students choice, ownership, and voice in their creative endeavors?

Elyse Eidman-Aadahl: We know that when kids have a strong writing program in which they do lots of writing and develop fluency, they do better on assessments. When students don't have opportunities for regular writing, but instead just do writing that is focused on preparing for the test, they may not do well, and in fact, a sole focus on writing for high-stakes situations can produce writing anxiety. Students who develop fluency and stamina, as well as confidence in their writing, typically excel in writing and on assessments. Confident writers will do better than anxiety-filled writers.

I know that teachers often feel a pressure to teach students the formula that will “ace the test.” For many years, I have worked with the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in writing and with several state committees, and NWP has its own writing assessment tools. In all of these cases, assessors work hard to not look for formulaic writing, but to look for writing that has an engaging voice and interesting content. When scorers see this kind of writing, it really stands out.

So I would say to teachers that if they encourage a lot of writing, help students develop fluency and ease in generating content, and
help them develop independence and confidence as writers, their students should do well in most writing assessments.

Collaborative Classroom: Given the fact that most texts that students experience at school are less representative than they should be, how do we encourage and support students’ own voices and teach them high-level writing skills? How can writing support individual children’s identities?

Elyse Eidman-Aadahl: Writing is an extraordinary thing. It's transcendent. I want students to understand that writing has the amazing capacity to let us all contribute to a conversation that started before we were born and that will continue after we're gone. Our writing will continue beyond us. Your location, your voice, your place, your community need to be a part of that conversation.

Therefore we want a wonderfully representative set of texts and imagery for our students. And, when we see a book that shows difference, we use it as a mentor text—as a way that we can learn about someone or something different from ourselves. We should also encourage students to write books themselves, bind them, and publish them so that they can see themselves in the books on the shelf.

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Collaborative Classroom: Our ongoing partnership with the National Writing Project has been such a rich experience. Could you say a little about how that partnership began?

Elyse Eidman-Aadahl: The National Writing Project began working with Collaborative Classroom back in 2005 when the organization was still called Developmental Studies Center, very early in the development of the Being a Writer program. This was a period of tremendous growth in both research about writing and the practice of teaching writing, so it was exciting to be part of imagining and conceptualizing a comprehensive curriculum that really focused on writing.

For context, it's important to remember that, at that time, there was a considerable investment in the development of reading curricula, and sometimes writing instruction was added as an afterthought. In contrast, Being a Writer puts writing and the writer at the center of the curriculum in a way that complements the full range of language arts experiences. It was great to be a part of that project early on.

Later, of course, local NWP sites may have worked with teachers and schools adopting the Being a Writer curriculum, and the partnership grew. Now, as a member of the Collaborative Classroom Board of Trustees, I have an opportunity to see how this partnership can continue into the future.

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Collaborative Classroom: As you've said, the National Writing Project was involved in the early development of Being a Writer and has continued to be supportive of the work we do in that curriculum. What specifically about our approach resonates with your beliefs about teaching writing?

Elyse Eidman-Aadahl: The program name itself says a lot about the intent. From the very beginning, Being a Writer treats the student as a writer. That is vitally important. The message that you are already a writer sends a message to students: you are a writer, you are going to get even better at your writing, and you are going to learn about a lot of different kinds of writing. The program is telling students that their voice is important. Being a Writer is also a curriculum that values and addresses the craft of writing and the fact
that there is a deep connection between what we want to do as readers, writers, speakers, and listeners.

Also, one of the many places where [fellow Collaborative Classroom board member] Zaretta Hammond and I agree is that frequently we see writing instruction that is over-scaffolded. Many teachers end up doing the majority of writing and thinking for their students, and unfortunately students are just doing a small part, remaining dependent learners.

*Being a Writer* takes a very different approach: students are given a lot of choice and independence, and teachers release responsibility throughout the program, yet have ways to support students with revising, editing, and correcting within the context of the students’ writing, where it makes sense. This approach to writing instruction enables students to build their skills and continually know they are writing for real audiences—and most importantly, they know that their individual voices and thoughts have value. Each student is, in effect, being a writer from the very start.