

2022

Confidence Builds Competence: Creating Literate Identities as Readers and Writers

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Recommended Citation

Oglan, V. A. & Goodman, J. R. (2022). Confidence builds competence: Creating literate identities as readers and writers. *South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education Journal*, 104-108.

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Confidence Builds Competence: Creating Literate Identities as Readers and Writers

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Abstract: The authors review four texts that offer teachers of all disciplines support for creating opportunities for students to develop their literate identities as readers and writers. The texts are: *Focus Lesson: How Photography Enhances the Teaching of Writing*; *Story Matters: Teaching Teens to Use the Tools of Narrative to Argue and Inform*; *Breathing New Life into Book Clubs: A Practical Guide for Teachers*; and *Unlocking the Power of Classroom Talk: Teaching Kids to Talk with Clarity and Purpose*.

Introduction

My younger brother is 12 months my junior and during our younger years we enjoyed spending time together. Growing up, people often thought we were fraternal twins because we were similar in so many ways. We both liked and excelled in sports; we had the same sense of humor; we enjoyed the same favorite foods; and quite often, we would finish each other's sentences. There was one area where we were not similar, and that was as students. I loved school and worked hard to excel. He hated school and dropped out. I know part of his decision to drop out came from a variety of factors, but the one factor that held the most influence for him was the many messages he received throughout the years from his teachers. Early on, his teachers identified him as a struggling student. They said he was not motivated, struggled to read and write, could not focus, and, at times, acted out in class. The messages I received from my teachers were the opposite. I was identified as a good student who was engaged and motivated. The reality is that both my brother and I believed these messages and those beliefs contributed to our confidence, or lack thereof, as learners. I believed I was capable of being successful academically; my brother did not.

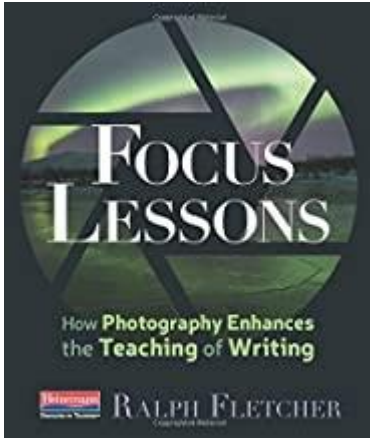
We are not born with beliefs, but rather, they are learned through our experiences. Our beliefs form the foundation for our identity. The development of our literate identity within academic settings is influenced by a variety of factors, one of

which is the interactions between teachers and students. Harter (2012) reports that teachers play a critical role in shaping a student's sense of self as a learner and that positive teacher-student relationships impact both the individual student and the community of learners. Students who feel valued and supported by their teachers have more opportunities for academic success.

In order to develop strong teacher-student relationships, teachers first need to build a positive and supportive classroom environment. The 21st Century classroom requires a design that is student-centered where students are actively engaged in learning and where the teacher is the facilitator of that learning. In this environment, students work both collaboratively and independently to problem solve and construct knowledge. Teachers provide supportive, ongoing learning opportunities for students to develop both as strategic learners and as critical and creative thinkers. Key to the success of this model of learning is the positive relationship a teacher builds with each student in an effort to contribute to a developing sense of confidence as a learner. Teachers need to share ongoing, daily conversations with students and provide feedback on their efforts to help students understand their strengths and offer them opportunities for next steps in learning. When students are confident, they believe they can improve and grow; they understand that learning requires great effort, perseverance, and patience. As their confidence grows, they become more competent. Their identity as readers and writers becomes stronger. Growing literate identities in students is at the heart of success for each student.

This collection of resources offers teachers of all disciplines support for creating opportunities for students to develop their literate identities as readers and writers. In his book, *Focus Lessons: How Photography Enhances the Teaching of Writing* (2019), Ralph Fletcher offers a refreshing view of how to use visuals to support writers across the curriculum along with a host of strategies to engage students in authentic writing. To help teachers provide writing lessons that align narrative and expository writing, Liz Prather's book *Story Matters: Teaching Teens to Use the Tools of Narrative to Argue and Inform* (2019) provides a collection of ideas about teaching writing that supports teachers to move away from formulaic, scripted, and traditional writing lessons to embrace the intersection of creative and critical writing and see the many connections between narration and exposition. In *Breathing New Life into Book Clubs: A Practical Guide for Teachers* (2019) Sonja Cherry-Paul & Dana Johansen provide a fresh perspective on book clubs and how teachers can establish and maintain classroom book clubs that have the potential to build communities of lifelong, joyful readers. Shana Frazin & Katy Wischow's book *Unlocking the Power of Classroom Talk: Teaching Kids to Talk with Clarity and Purpose* (2020) offers teachers a new way to think about the power of purposeful classroom talk along with a host of strategies for teaching four authentic purposes for conversation in the classroom. These helpful resources will offer teachers new paths to explore in

their classroom practice, and they will want to include these helpful resources in their professional libraries. (VAO)



Focus Lesson: How Photography Enhances the Teaching of Writing

by Ralph Fletcher 2019, 128 pp., Heinemann. ISBN: 032-510-917-6

Teaching writing is hard work for any teacher at any level. Most students do not like to write and many teachers are challenged to find

classroom practices that will engage students in any writing endeavor. As a result, oftentimes, writing gets relegated to the back burner, and students get limited practice writing for different purposes. Approximately 27% of students in grades 6-12, on average, scored at or above the proficient level which means 73% of students are below the proficient level (NAEP, 2017). These statistics are startling and signal a need for a renewed focus on writing, not just in the ELA classroom but across the curriculum. With the new state and national standards, content teachers are charged with teaching content specific writing yet, often, they are not provided the professional development to help them design a writing curriculum that will offer writing engagements that will be both of interest to students and that will meet the writing standards.

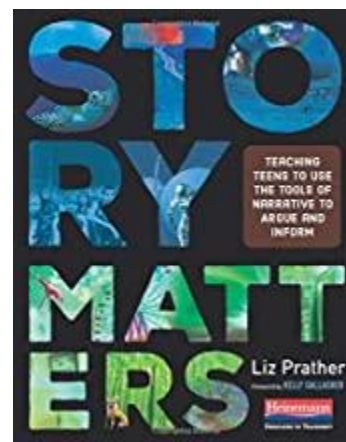
In the introduction to his book *Focus Lessons: How Photography Enhances the Teaching of Writing* (2019), Ralph Fletcher once again offers teachers new ideas to explore in their classroom practice when it comes to teaching writing. Fletcher writes: “It turns out that photography can illuminate the craft of writing and help us understand it in a whole new way.” (p. xiv). He further adds that photography in the 21st century has exploded since most people have cell phones equipped with sophisticated cameras. As such, Fletcher writes that our cameras are used to document the moments of our lives in images. Individuals can then go back and “read” their images whenever they want. Fletcher suggests that “the world is becoming increasingly visual” (p. xiv). It is clear Fletcher suggests that students not only observe photographs but share in the experiences of taking photographs.

Fletcher’s book is easy to navigate. It is divided into two sections. The first section deals with his journey into photography and his learning curve. He details how he was influenced by a friend who, at a young age, was a serious photographer. There is also a chapter on the camera as a writer’s notebook and how the two are aligned. Fletcher admits this alignment is an emerging idea that he continues to explore. Of special interest to teachers are the sections with teaching connections that offer ideas on how to rethink the use of photography as a springboard for writing engagements. The second section is devoted first to the classroom where Fletcher

offers a chapter devoted to easy to follow craft lessons. The 15 lessons are stand-alone so teachers can pick and choose lesson topics. Teachers will immediately see the many writing connections in these craft lessons with ideas for point of view, arresting detail, using an image to prompt creativity, and creating mood just to name a few. Aside from the craft lessons, section two also offers chapters that deal with topics related to photography and writing. For each of these chapters, there is a section that offers photo tips for the budding photographers. One chapter focuses first on how to do a close reading of a photograph to determine what is happening in the details and second on the photograph as a mentor text. Another chapter in section two highlights the idea of how photography is a tool for learning. It is here Fletcher suggests that teachers instruct students on how to take photographs so they aren’t merely taking a collection of images but learning how to interact with the images as well. Fletcher offers support for teachers in photography techniques for those who have limited knowledge. Throughout the chapters in section two, Fletcher offers a variety of suggestions for teachers to help them implement the use of photographs in their classrooms to enhance the writing experiences for students.

There is also a useful appendix with access to resources for finding photographs, and a partial list of photographers and their websites. Fletcher also offers a section on how to access all the photographs in the book along with additional online resources.

Students of all ages are fascinated with images and teachers are aware that images are a scaffold for both comprehension and critical/creative thinking. Using photographs to support students as writers is one way that may boost their confidence as writers. This book will offer teachers a refreshing look at their classroom writing practice that can add to their repertoire of strategies to engage students as writers through photographs. (VAO)



Story Matters: Teaching Teens to Use the Tools of Narrative to Argue and Inform

by Liz Prather, 2019, 208 pp., Heinemann. ISBN 032-509-950-2

If you were in a room full of teachers and asked them to raise their hands if they considered themselves a

reader, I would venture to guess that 85-95% of them would raise their hands. Now, if you were to then ask this same group of teachers to raise their hands if they considered themselves to be a writer, I would venture to guess that around 30-40% would consider themselves writers. Why is this? When we think about our school writing experiences, most of us will say that we were assigned writing, given a deadline to submit the work, then waited for the grade. We have all had

the school experience of getting a writing assignment back and seeing nothing but red marks all over the paper. Even if there were comments made by the teacher, most of the time those comments were about errors in spelling, grammar, and organization rather than celebrations of the ideas presented. These experiences shaped how we saw ourselves as writers, and most of us listened to the voices that said we were not good writers.

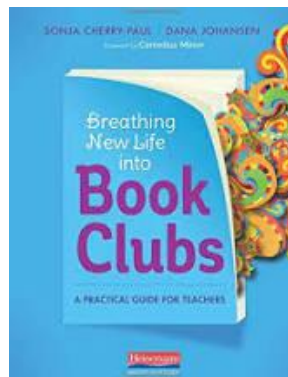
Too often, teachers in grades 6-12 focus writing instruction on formulaic expository writing assignments that are graded and returned to students with little or no follow up on what students can do to improve. With the new state and national standards argumentative and informational writing have taken precedence over narrative writing. Often the poetry, personal narratives, writer's notebooks, writing conferences, and personal publishing, get left to the end of the semester if there is time – and most often there is no time. In her book *Story Matters: Teaching Teens to Use the Tools of Narrative to Argue and Inform* (2019), Liz Prather encourages teachers to embrace narrative writing as an entrée into expository writing. She encourages teachers to cast off the notion that narrative writing is inferior to expository writing, that facts and analysis are more important than story. For Prather, narration is embedded in all exposition and can be found in textbooks, medical journals, political speeches, and scientific lab reports. It is the narrative details in these writings that keep the reader interested. In her classroom, Prather calls this form of writing narrative nonfiction and she defines it for her students as “informational or argumentative text, that uses a story or a few narrative techniques to engage the reader” (p. 6). She believes that students are willing to write stories about their lives and they can grow as writers by being successful story tellers. The writing skills they develop through narrative writing can be applied to all writing situations; they are not genre specific. Prather is not alone in her claim that narrative writing is an important step in developing confident writers. Hillocks (2006) writes that narrative writing is interesting to learners since it allows them to write about meaningful experiences, then reflect on and learn from them. Students are more motivated to write about themselves than about an assigned topic that lacks relevance to them.

Prather's book has seven stand-alone chapters that teachers can easily navigate. Teachers will find chapter 1 “Narrative as Home Base, Ground Zero, Mother Ship” a must read. Here Prather makes her argument that all writing, both expository and narration, employ solid writing skills and that these skills are not genre specific. She offers examples of expository texts that use narrative techniques and suggests that students need opportunities to use mentor texts, like her examples, to read and analyze to determine the balance between narration and exposition. Through repeated exposure to these mentor texts, and with practice in writing narrative nonfiction, students will then see the many connections between the two writing forms. Prather offers a list of 15 narrative techniques (p. 22) employed by one author that will be helpful to teachers.

In subsequent chapters, Prather explores narrative techniques such as finding the story element, creating tension, using characters, determining structure, exercising effective word

choice. She also demonstrates how each can be used in narrative nonfiction. There are many lessons, engagements, activities, and samples offered throughout the book. In addition, there are appendices which include a sample unit plan and a list of mentor texts.

Teachers who want to build on student confidence and identity as writers will want to have this book in their professional library. Prather's book has the potential to inform classroom writing practice in new and interesting ways. (VAO)



Breathing New Life into Book Clubs: A Practical Guide for Teachers

by Sonja Cherry-Paul & Dana Johansen, 2019, 176 pp., Heinemann. ISBN 978-032-507-685-0

Think about how an ideal book club for you and your friends would look and sound. Now think about how book clubs for your students would look and sound. Are they the same? Are you filled with doubts about trying classroom book clubs? Have you given up on book clubs, or decided they aren't worth the effort? If this describes you, you aren't alone. It also describes many teachers of all grade levels who have either given up on book clubs or are unwilling to try them.

In “Chapter 1: Creating a Culture of Reading through Book Clubs,” the authors of this book extend an open invitation to teachers who are looking to breathe new life into their already established book clubs as well as teachers who are looking to establish book clubs for their readers. The authors are strong believers in books clubs as a way for all students to make gains in reading achievement while simultaneously developing reading identities as lifelong readers.

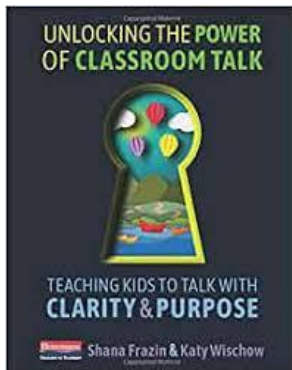
After reviewing research related to classroom book clubs, the authors conclude how (1) several terms such as literature circles, learning clubs, etc. have been used interchangeably with the phrase *book clubs*; (2) the two defining principles of a book club are *choice* and *ownership*; and, (3) the benefits of book clubs extend far beyond reading comprehension to include influencing “students as they develop as critical thinkers, lifelong readers, and change makers in the world” (p. 7).

Readers of this book are asked to think of the eight essential components for book clubs as a Ferris wheel. “You can see in your mind a joyful experience filled with friends and laughter. The wheel is a circle of interconnected pieces that go around and around, and at the center of the wheel is the hub” (p. 8). The authors go on to explain the importance of each part and how the parts work together. They state that at the center, the hub, is the discussion. After all, this is the primary reason for the creation of the book club. They continue to explain that rotating around the hub are the remaining seven essential

components. These include planning, reading, digital tools, written response, observation, coaching, and assessment.

The remaining chapters in the book focus on critical parts of the journey that are necessary to breathe new life into book clubs. In chapter 2, readers will learn how to organize and set up book clubs by considering logistics of getting books and grouping students. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 include mini-lessons as well as thinking about issues such as fitting book clubs into the curriculum, managing student-led discussions, and scaffolding readers as they journey together through a text. The authors conclude the book by offering culminating activities that give students ways to celebrate their clubs' achievements while extending their reading beyond the classroom walls.

If we want all students to grow and change as readers while developing their individual reading identities, we need to rethink our ideas about establishing and maintaining classroom book clubs that have the potential to build communities of lifelong, joyful readers. It is our job as teachers to understand how to establish classroom conditions where students will feel encouraged to take risks as readers and empowered enough to talk freely with peers about their thinking. As Sonja and Dana write, "Book clubs create close-knit communities of readers and thinkers and help students become lifelong readers" (p. 3). This book is an excellent new resource to help all teachers on their journeys to "take part in a reading revolution by breathing new life into book clubs" (p. 152). JRG



Unlocking the Power of Classroom Talk: Teaching Kids to Talk with Clarity and Purpose

by Shana Frazin & Katy Wischow, 2019, 160 pp. Heinemann. ISBN 978-032-509-871-5

Students who actively engage in authentic book club gatherings luxuriate in talk. It is in a book

club that students can critically analyze text as they talk about their own connections, questions, inferences, important ideas, and images created by the author's choice of words. If this describes the kind of student talk teachers want to hear in book clubs, how can this talk be nurtured? Is there a need to teach middle level students *how* to talk?

This book offers teachers a new way to think about the power of classroom talk. Readers will feel like the authors are sitting alongside them sharing their beliefs as well as providing them with opportunities for "Listening in on Talk" and "Naming What's Noteworthy." Readers will appreciate the visuals included in the book that provide support for or examples of strategies for teaching purposeful talk. This book has nine chapters divided into three parts: "Foundations of Talk," "Purposes for Talk," and "Leveling Up Your Talk."

Part One contains the authors' beliefs about talk. They point out that just "like reading, writing, math, art, tennis, singing, or anything else worth doing, talk is something that people can get better at" (p. 4). However, getting better at a skill takes deliberate practice, powerful teaching, and supportive coaching. In other words, just as teachers purposefully plan for teaching content area skills across all disciplines, the authors point out that teaching talk "is an essential part of the equation" (p. 4). They propose that, in the same way writers go through a process for writing, great conversationalists follow a process of collecting and generating ideas, choosing what to say, developing their choice, acting on the talk, and reflecting on the whole process. Naming these predictable parts of the "talk cycle" makes them explicit for teaching and student learning (pp. 14-15).

Think about typical classroom talk where students routinely answer questions, recite bits of information, offer definitions, and share what they remember and understand of the content. The authors name this talk as *reporting*. Students report when they genuinely cannot imagine another purpose for having a conversation. In Part Two, the authors give readers strategies for teaching four authentic purposes for conversation in the classroom.

The first purpose is to build relationships. Through this talk, "students come to know each other and themselves more deeply. Talking to build relationships builds a stronger community" (p. 33). The authors share five strategies that teachers can use to help students bridge the gap between social talk and academic talk.

The second purpose is to play with ideas. The authors write: "This is talk for the pure joy of discovering what new thinking might emerge if we talk long enough...Playing with ideas lets kids dwell in possibility" (p. 47). Four instructional strategies support teaching of this purpose.

The third purpose is to clarify, analyze, and argue. Even though the authors point out that "this talk is hard to teach, hard to assess, and hard to coach" (p. 63), they also share eight strategies teachers can use to help students develop critical thinking and talking skills. This way of talking is the academic discourse of disciplines. It is the talk of disciplinary insiders---a critical part of disciplinary literacy. Students in middle school classrooms must learn how to talk authentically across content areas and disciplines. This book provides excellent support for teachers seeking to elevate students' academic discourse.

The fourth purpose circles back to the beginning of Part Two---talking to report. After all, how could classroom talk exist without having students answer questions, recite bits of information, offer definitions, and share what they remember and understand? The key to this purpose is teaching students to consider purpose and audience. Included are five strategies teachers can use to help students learn authentic uses for reporting.

In Part Three, the authors consider the relationship between listening and talking; making talk visible by celebrating, going

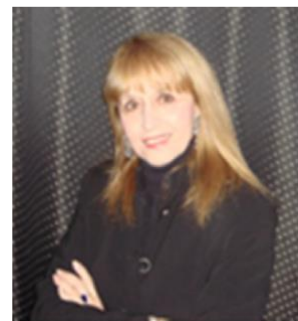
public, and assessing; and what to do when there are problems. Additionally, they provide a list of supplemental videos and online resources.

Teachers who read this book will find practical ideas to enhance existing curriculum. It is not a matter of adding-on yet another thing to teach; it is a matter of equipping middle school students with the tools they need for social and academic success. As the authors write: “But if you define talk as communication, self-expression, exploration, and getting ideas across, then it becomes even more urgent that all kids have access to instruction that helps them participate” (p. 7). JRG

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Recommended Citation (APA 7th ed.)

Oglan, V. A. & Goodman, J. R. (2022). Confidence builds competence: Creating literate identities as readers and writers. *South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education Journal*, 104-108.

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Published online: 1 March 2022

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