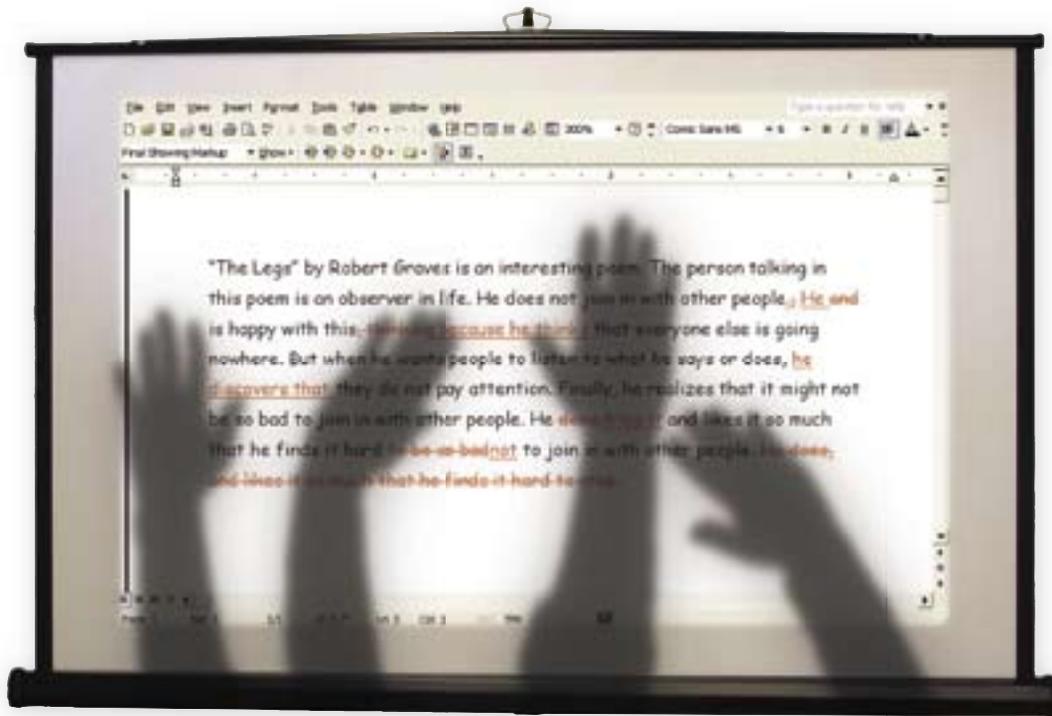


# Whole-Class Inquiry: Language Arts



The language arts classroom is largely about leading students to become literate in their own voices and to see writing as a tool for thinking. I come to know my students through their writing and through class discussions about the texts we read and the texts we write.

The challenge of good writing instruction is leading students to view their compositions as spaces in which they can seek, engage, probe, construct, and store understanding that is continually in flux. All too often, students write one draft and call it quits, failing to push their thinking past the words as they originally fell and aligned themselves on paper. Thus, writing becomes the paper you submit, not the process of developing and continually re-seeing the ideas it expresses.

As much as technologies provide students with the tools they use to

capture their thoughts and convey them in writing (e.g., stylus, pencil, word processor), they also can provide an answer to how writing teachers can use inquiry-based workshop approaches to move students through the written text, illustrating how it develops, evolves, and grows throughout the drafting process.

## Writer's Workshop

Connecting a classroom computer to a projector, a document camera, or an electronic whiteboard allows for display of a sample of student writing to the whole class. Using a workshop model, an inquiry-driven discussion of the projected text would offer suggestions meant to clarify, extend, and enrich the composition, while probing writers to consider and justify their thinking.

In a writer's workshop, students select a topic, develop a draft, discuss

drafts with peers, and revise their drafts. They learn to carefully observe, test hypotheses, question, analyze, interpret, and “place hold” findings through various forms of representation like writing and imagining.

Talk happens before, during, and after students write. We brainstorm topics, explore model texts or information sources, and eventually discuss the composition through what my students referred to as “how and why talk.” The goal is for students to

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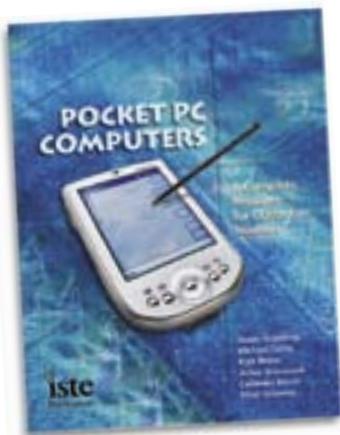
**Subject:** Ed Tech research, whole-class inquiry-based learning

**Technology:** Projector system

**Standards:** NETS•S 3–6; NETS•T II; NETS•A II (<http://www.iste.org/nets/>)

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become more reflective and intentional, knowing that they will need to clearly articulate their process.

## Into the Classroom

Mrs. Lee, a seventh-grade language arts teacher at Western Middle School, is using her computer and projector to share a student's paragraph for peer review. Sam, the student writer, was working on a five-paragraph essay that offered an interpretive analysis of Robert Graves' "The Legs." Where the prompt asked students to focus on his use of metaphor in the poem, Sam's introduction offered interpretation and no mention of literary devices.

"The Legs" by Robert Graves is an interesting poem. The person talking in this poem is an observer in life. He does not join in with other people, and is happy with this, thinking that everyone else is going nowhere. But when he wants people to listen to what he says or does, they do not pay attention. Finally, he realizes that it might not be so bad to join in with other people. He does, and likes it so much that he finds it hard to be so bad to join in with other people. He does, and likes it so much that he finds it hard to stop.

As class began, Mrs. Lee projected Sam's introductory paragraph and asked students to write comments in their journals, in preparation for a full class discussion. While students worked, she opened Inspiration and displayed a blank sequence chart.

Once students had taken a couple of minutes to write their questions and responses, Mrs. Lee asked Sam to identify the main idea he was looking to communicate in his introduction. Sam offered, "I want to be sure that readers know that the poem is about a change."

One of Sam's peers, Cecelia, immediately challenged his work, offering, "Sam, it took you so long to get there that I stopped reading before I got that." The majority of the class agreed with Cecelia, as Paul addressed what Sam needed to do as a writer. He suggested, "If I were writing the piece, I'd get there fast ... like in the first sentence."

Sam agreed, and asked Mrs. Lee to write "change" in the rectangle of the sequence chart, signaling that this would be the main idea of the paragraph and would be addressed in the first sentence. He then sighed, "But, if I do that, I only have one sentence for the whole paragraph."

After another student in the class read the prompt aloud, Sam and his peers began to see how the introduction needed to be structured in order to take advantage of the ideas he wanted to express in his fuller essay. He explained,

My plan is to talk about how the poem is both his journey and the journey that the reader takes as he experiences what the poet observes about the legs. The legs are the metaphor. We, the readers, are the legs.

Though it took some prompting from his peers in the workshop, Sam returned to the sequence chart. He completed more of the blocks before he started writing sentences. He took Michelle's suggestion to focus his efforts there first because "it might be tough to stay focused in your writing unless you've figured out where you want to go." After two edits, his sequence chart was concise and directly tied to the prompt (see Figure 1).

Sam's sequence chart contained only one word in each block, prompting him to work on development of the paragraph alongside the input provided by his peers. What developed was an introduction that was clear, concise, and provided the



Figure 1. Sam's sequence chart.

reader with a path into the essay that followed. Sam wrote the paragraph within the discussion, allowing him to gather insights and feedback throughout the process. The final draft read:

“The Legs” by Robert Graves is an extended metaphor poem about change. The legs stand for the reader, the speaker, and society. They are constantly moving in circles, not going anywhere. The speaker resists joining in until he realizes that no one pays attention unless he joins along. The power of the poem is that it pulls the reader into the same participation through its content, its rhythm and its voice.

### Instructional Value Added

Any technology that teachers bring into the writing classroom needs to add instructional value to the task at hand, allowing us to do something better than what we were able to do before. Here, use of the projector and classroom computer during writing workshop enriched instruction in three main ways:

1. **Student participants see writing unfold.** Inquiry within the writer's workshop is about figuring out what a writer does to convey intended meaning. In this discussion, not only were students able to view Sam's paragraph, but they were also able to watch him revise and edit in response to their comments, starting with the graphic organizer and then returning to the written paragraph to bring those ideas to the writing. Sam tapped into the

unique capacities of the tools he worked with, taking advantage of color, cutting and pasting, and even using embedded comments to leave himself notes as he worked on subsequent revisions and the “meat” of the paper.

2. **Student writers compose.** As students respond to the questions and comments provided in the workshop, they not only share their ideas about their work as writers but they employ those ideas on the spot as they work to revise the text. Where the workshop allows students to see how their work is responded to by readers, the technology here allows them to share revisions while receiving feedback that allows them to know whether or not their intended meaning has been communicated.
3. **The class learning community grows.** As Short, Harste, and Burke explained in their 1996 book, *Creating Classrooms for Authors and Inquirers*, members of a learning community make personal connections and observations; they collaborate with others to experiment, discuss, transmediate, attend to anomalies, present information and reflect. Within this task, students are working with shared texts as Sam works to create the organizer and the paragraph that grows from those ideas.

Without the projection, students would be working with a static piece of writing or ideas as they were written on a transparency. Conversation could only go so far, and much of the work would remain on the writer's shoulders to think through on his or her own.

### Future Directions

This lesson is a simple recasting of a tried-and-true best practice—writer's conferences within writing workshop. What is different is the value added by adding the projector and classroom computer to the writer's toolkit. We could have just as easily used a wiki or another composition tool to allow students to demonstrate their revision practices. It is not so much a factor of what the software allowed us to do. Instead, it was a factor of access. The key is that every student in the classroom could see the writing unfold from an early draft to one that responds to the initial readings and insights from the class community.

This practice is even more critical as an increasing number of U.S. states move their assessments to computerized forms, requiring that students and teachers expand the writers' toolkit to include word processors throughout the writing process. It's no longer enough to assume that students have the literacy needed to move from a process with pencils and paper to a process that uses 21st century tools. Instead, we need to equip them with authentic classroom experiences that empower them to work as writers in and outside of the classroom.



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