Research Base

UNITS OF STUDY
in Opinion, Information, *and* Narrative Writing

A COMMON CORE WORKSHOP CURRICULUM

LUCY CALKINS *with* COLLEAGUES *from the*
TEACHERS COLLEGE READING AND WRITING PROJECT

The *Units of Study in Opinion, Information, and Narrative Writing* series grows out of decades of think tanks and in-school research and practice that began in New York City Schools and that has spread throughout the country and world. This work, spearheaded by the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project (TCRWP), has included developing, piloting, revising, and implementing state-of-the-art curriculum in teaching writing. The TCRWP writing workshop model that has evolved over time from this continual process of research in what works when it comes to writing instruction is the foundation of the *Units of Study in Opinion, Information, and Narrative Writing* series.

The hundreds of thousands of teachers who used an earlier, very different edition of this series have spread the word that the writing workshop has given their children unbelievable power not only as writers but also as thinkers, learners, and readers. School districts are finding that when teachers receive the education they deserve in the teaching of writing, those teachers are able to provide students with clear, sequenced, vibrant writing instruction (along with opportunities to write daily for their own important purposes), and this makes a dramatic difference in young people's abilities to write. Powerful writing instruction produces visible and immediate results.

It is TCRWP's belief that there is not a single string of sequenced lessons that applies to every possible classroom. Instruction must be responsive to the individual needs of the writers in each class. On the other hand, the Project does believe in strong models of excellent instruction for teachers. The sample curriculum offered in *Units of Study in Opinion, Information, and Narrative Writing* by Lucy Calkins and Colleagues, published by Heinemann, is just such a model.

The curriculum in the *Units of Study in Opinion, Information, and Narrative Writing* series is grounded in the TCRWP's work in schools and is intended to be tailored and adapted to specific children and classrooms. The assessment system that is part of the series offers methods and recommendations for tailoring the units based on what teachers learn about their students through on-demand performance assessments, thus assuring a student-centered curriculum.
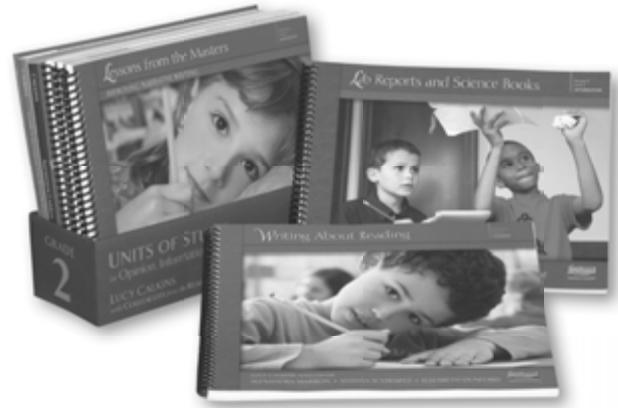
The *Units of Study in Opinion, Information, and Narrative Writing* series—in fact, all of the pursuits of the Project—are based on a handful of fundamental, research-based principles.

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The foundation of the *Units of Study in Opinion, Information, and Narrative Writing* series lies in the understanding that writing is a lifelong process during which we continually lift the level of our writing skills and outgrow ourselves as writers. Students learn that all writing has essential traits to which they must attend when developing a piece. Writers learn various ways to find topics they wish to write about. They learn to make purposeful decisions about the structure and organization of a piece. They learn a repertoire of methods for elaborating. They learn to craft their pieces using literary language and devices and to employ the conventions of written language (Anderson 2005; Calkins 1994; Elbow 1989; Graves 1994; Wood Ray 1999).

Trait-based writing instruction has been shown to raise student performance on standardized writing tests (Jarner, Kozol, Nelson & Salsberry 2000). Most states have adopted some form of writing assessment on their annual tests (Spandel 2001). By teaching students ways to structure their writing in accordance with the type of writing they are producing and in ways that affect their reader, to elaborate using a wide repertoire of strategies, to use literary language and devices to make artful pieces of writing, and to use the conventions of written language, the *Units of Study in Opinion, Information, and Narrative Writing* series strengthens the skills of young, apprentice writers and prepares them for academic success. As writers build their knowledge of the qualities of good writing, they become critical readers of their writing and begin to set goals for themselves as writers, using feedback from their peers and teacher as well as self-assessments to lift the level of their writing (Anderson 2005; Graves 1994).

The conventions of written language thread throughout each of the units. Writers learn conventions that they can then practice in the pieces they are writing, and they learn how using those conventions can help them better convey their meaning to their reader (Atwell 1998; Calkins 1994; Graves 1983; Weaver 1997). Research has shown that to be effective, the conventions of writing must be taught within the context of a writer's own writing (Anderson 2005; Hillocks 1986; Weaver 1997; Wilde 2007).

Approximately three decades ago, a flurry of books and articles called for a writing revolution. Peter Elbow, Donald Murray, James Moffett, Ken Macrorie, and a series of edited volumes titled *Writers at Work* combined to popularize the message that when writers write, they do not sit down with a quill pen and immediately produce graceful, compelling prose. Instead, writers work through *a process of writing*, a process that contains recursive stages.

Different people use different terms when describing those stages. For example, some use the term prewriting and others rehearsal, but either way, widespread agreement has emerged that writers spend time preparing for writing. This stage involves living a "writerly life": collecting material for writing, weighing alternative plans for how a piece of writing might go, talking about one's topic, and reading texts that resemble the text one hopes to write. Rehearsal can also involve research.

Writers also draft. Early drafts are like playing in clay more than inscribing in marble; a writer might try alternative leads, explore different voices for a text, or freewrite, keeping her eyes glued on the subject and trying to capture the contours of it in tentative form. Writers shift back and forth between drafting and revising. Revision means, quite literally, "to see again." During revision, a writer pulls back from a draft to reread and rethink, What is it I really want to say? What structure might best bring readers along to (and through) my content? Writers revise to discover and convey

meaning and to use everything at their disposal to make that reading clear and potent to readers. Revision may involve rewriting an introduction, reconsidering the validity of one's evidence, and elaborating on important sections while deleting unimportant ones. Revision usually involves anticipating a reader's response. A writer may ask, What do I want my readers to think early on when they begin reading? Later? What do I want them to feel and do in response? Revision usually involves at least a second and often a third draft, since revisions that are bound by the contours of a first draft are held to the original structure, pace, and voice.

Finally, writers edit, which involves smoothing out, linking, tightening, clarifying, fact checking, and correcting. During editing, writers think about spelling, punctuation, and word choice, yes, but writers also think about fact checking, language, and clarity. All of that sounds like a very long and arduous process, but there are times when a text is written quickly—say, in an hour or in half an hour. Even when writing quickly, writers still tend to go through abbreviated versions of each of these steps of the writing process.

Just as professional writers have a process for developing their work, young, apprentice writers also benefit from a clear process through which to develop their writing (Atwell 1998; Calkins 1994; Elbow 1981; Fletcher 1993; Graves 1994; Murray 1984). Research shows that using a writing process for instruction in the complex task of writing increases student achievement (Hillocks 1986; Holdzkom, Reed, Porter & Rubin 1982; Keech &Thomas 1979).

Each unit in *Units of Study* cycles children through the writing process multiple times. Children have opportunities to plan for and rehearse writing, to flash-draft, and to reread their rough draft, thinking, How can I make this even better? Feedback from a reader can help a writer imagine ways to improve the draft. And studying mentor texts to figure out what the author did that the writer too could try in her own writing helps the writer revise. A writer will always write with the conventions that are easily under his control, but once a text is almost ready for readers, the writer will want to edit it, taking extra care to make the text more clear and more correct. Often the writer will use outside assistance—from a partner or a teacher—to edit. Finally, writers publish their work to share with a community—either their class, their school community, or a community outside their school. In most units, children cycle through this process again, this time with more independence.

We know that writers benefit most from predictable and simple structures in the writing workshop (Calkins 1994; Graves 1994; Short, Harste & Burke 1996). Writing improves in a palpable, dramatic fashion when children are given explicit instruction and lots of time to write, clear goals, and powerful feedback. When teachers explicitly teach the qualities, habits, and strategies of effective writing, that writing becomes better, and

the improvement is evident within days and weeks, not just months.

The *Units of Study in Opinion, Information, and Narrative Writing* workshop model has three basic structures: the minilesson, independent writing time with conferring and small-group work, and the share sessions at the end of writing time. These structures support the basis of the writing instruction—providing direct instruction, guided practice as students begin trying their hand at the new learning, and independent implementation of the strategies (Vygotsky 1978).

The minilesson offers students direct instruction on an explicit strategy for writing. The specific strategy for each day is selected by teachers based on what their assessments have revealed that writers need. During the minilesson, teachers demonstrate the process that writers often use to do the type of writing being studied and they scaffold students to practice the steps of the process. This is a quick, guided practice for students in which they can receive immediate feedback from both their classmates and their teacher. The minilesson is short, usually around ten minutes long (Calkins 1994; Fletcher 1993; Graves 1994).

Students then move onto independent writing, which constitutes the bulk of time in the writing workshop. Students independently draw on a repertoire of strategies they've been taught. During this time, the teacher meets individually with students for a writing conference or meets with three to six students for small-group work. Conferences and small-group work provide students with individualized instruction based on each student's need. Students receive direct instruction, feedback, and guided practice during these sessions (Atwell 1989; Anderson 2000, 2005; Calkins 1994; Graves 1994).

The share session at the end of class provides students with an opportunity to share and support work in progress Students may share their writing with a partner or small group and get feedback. The teacher may use the share time to teach an additional lesson that builds on or further develops the strategy introduced during the minilesson, or a new strategy. The class may come together to look at a piece of writing from a professional writer and read it together to gather ideas for what they themselves might try in their own pieces. Or, the students may use a self-assessment to check in with themselves as opinion, information, or narrative writers, setting goals for how to lift the level of their writing. Ultimately, the share session is a time for writers to come together to share their writing, explore possibilities, and set goals for how they will improve as writers (Calkins 1994).

Research Principle 4

To write well, writers need ample time to write every day, with clear expectations for stamina and volume.

Just as learners become skilled at playing an instrument or swimming or playing tennis or reading by doing those things, writing, too, is learned through practice. John Guthrie's study (2004) illustrates that fourth-graders who read at the second-grade level spend a half-hour a day reading, and fourth-graders who read at the eighth-grade level spend four and a half hours a day reading. Success in writing, like success in reading or tennis or swimming, directly relates to the amount of writing and rewriting a person does. This means that day after day, children need to write. They need to write for long stretches of time—for something like thirty or forty minutes of each day's writing workshop. And it means that volume and stamina matter.

Writers need to write frequently and in many different genres to gain independent control of what they are learning about effective writing. Writers need frequent opportunities to practice their craft, learning how to think and write in many genres for many purposes (Atwell 1989; Calkins 1994; Fletcher 1993; Graves 1983, 1994). TCRWP's *Units of Study in Opinion, Information, and Narrative Writing* series provides for extended daily writing practice in various genres. During this time, students work independently on their writing, putting into practice all the strategies they are learning about effective writing. Students also receive additional instruction during this time, either in one-on-one conferences or in small groups, to specifically tailor the teaching to the individual needs of each writer (Anderson 2005; Calkins 1994).

Research Principle 5

A successful curriculum provides differentiated instruction for students of all ability levels and support for English language learners.

Whereas twenty years ago 95% of jobs were low-skilled, today those jobs only constitute 10% of our entire economy (Darling-Hammond et al 2008). Children who leave school today without strong literacy skills will no longer find a job waiting for them.

In years past, one approach to supporting struggling writers was to slow down instruction, remove parts of the curriculum, or teach an alternate curriculum. Allington and Walmsey (1995) found that these practices resulted in compounding the delays; as the curriculum was slowed or less was taught, students fell even further behind.

The workshop model in the *Units of Study in Opinion, Information, and Narrative Writing* series is, by definition, always individualized. The child chooses what she will write about, chooses the words she will use, chooses the people and places and topics and opinions that will be brought forth in the texts, chooses meanings that are vibrantly important to her, and chooses the level of vocabulary and of sentence and text structures. Therefore, the instruction teachers provide is necessarily differentiated.

In addition, the workshop classroom is organized in such clear, predictable, consistent ways that children quickly become comfortable participating in their ongoing structures. When teachers follow these routines day after day, students can focus their energies on trying to figure out how to do their work rather than on worrying over what they will be expected to do. The predictability of the workshop provides tremendous reassurance to a child who is just learning English, and this is amplified if workshop structures repeat themselves across other subjects.

As students begin to write and think about their own stories, information texts, and persuasive essays, they will be given the opportunity over and over again to learn new vocabulary, use new language structures, and work on expressing their thoughts in a highly contextualized and pertinent situation. That is to say, they will be learning about language in a culturally relevant and high-interest activity and writing about material that comes from their own lives and experiences. The curriculum suggests many ways to teach each skill as well as many ways to offer repetition if needed (Calkins 1994; Graves 1994; Wood Ray 1999).

The assessment system that is a part of the *Units of Study* series also provides teachers with concrete tools, benchmark samples, and rubrics to further differentiate the instruction they provide their particular students. Teachers may opt to begin the year with an on-demand assessment for opinion, information, and narrative writing that will provide them with the necessary data to identify the particular strengths of a student writer and to place her on a learning progression for each type of writing. By looking ahead to the qualities of writing expected at the next level of the learning progression, teachers can make an individual learning plan for that student. Teachers can teach qualities of writing in whole-group minilessons, small-group strategy sessions, or individual conferences. The teacher can tailor teaching to the specific, individual needs of all the students in the class (Anderson 2000; Calkins 1994; Graves 1994).

Research Principle 6

Writing and reading are joined processes, and students learn best when writing and reading instruction are coordinated.

Any effective writing curriculum acknowledges that it is important for writers to be immersed in powerful writing—literature and other kinds of texts. Children learn to write from being immersed in and affected by texts that other authors have written.

Children especially need opportunities to read as writers. Students learn to mentor themselves by studying the writing of others, not only developing a sense of what it is they are trying to make, but also learning the traditions of that particular kind of text. Poets leave white space, how-to writers record steps, storytellers convey the passage of time. All writers care that the sound of their words matches the tone of their meaning. All writers care that they choose precisely right words. By studying texts that resemble those they are trying to make, children learn the tools of their trade. They look closely at the writing of published authors they admire in order to learn ways to develop meaning, to structure their piece, to find craft moves they can try in their own writing, and to study the ways other authors use conventions of written language that they, too, can try (Anderson 2000, 2005; Calkins 1994; Murray 1990).

Throughout most of the units in the *Units of Study in Opinion, Information, and Narrative Writing* series, the reading and writing work is directly correlated. Ongoing, built-in book study provides exemplary texts on which students model their own writing. In reading, students learn to make meaning from published authors' writing; in writing, students learn to write so as to convey meaning to their readers. For example, if students are learning in reading to stop after dialogue and notice what that dialogue reveals about the character who says it, then in writing students will learn to reveal their characters' traits by crafting dialogue that reveals those traits. In short, students learn to implement in their own writing the same things that they are learning to interpret in their reading.

Research Principle 7

Children need clear goals and frequent feedback. They need to hear ways their writing is getting better and to know what their next steps might be.

Research by John Hattie and others (2008) has shown that to support learners' progress, it is crucial to encourage them to work toward crystal clear goals and to give them feedback that shows them what they are doing well and ways they are progressing, as well as letting them know next steps. This is especially true when the feedback is part of a whole system of learning that includes learners working toward goals that are ambitious and yet within grasp.

Effective feedback is not interchangeable with praise; it is not the same as instruction; it is not the same as a grade or score. While each of these may be a part of it, feedback is much more.

Effective feedback includes an understanding of what the learner has done and what the learner is trying to do or could do, a sort of renaming of the situation the learner finds herself in, including some of her history in this work. It is a particular response to exactly the work the learner has done. Effective feedback also includes an outside perspective—a reader's point of view, for example, or a teacher's point of view. Constructive feedback may include suggestions for the learner of strategies to try, obstacles to remove, or a baby step to aim for toward the larger, more distant goal.

The *Units of Study in Opinion, Information, and Narrative Writing* series provides the structures, guidelines, and examples that enable teachers to provide this type of effective, differentiated feedback.

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