

Hamline Literacy Institute
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Notes taken by Lori Jackson

Keynote

Isoke Titilayo Nia *Why Study Genre*

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The unflappable Isoke Nia!

**“The Writing Process is something I never want to be without...
It's thinking. It's satisfying, and it's frustrating. It's very hard but it's exhilarating
to do hard things.”**

Toni Morrison

Genre Study: What's the big deal about it?
What does the work look like in three separate genre studies?

Spoke about her involvement with writer's workshop as a fourth grade teacher and did not have a path. Shared her experiences encountering Donald Graves began to really change her perspective as he said it's good, the caliber is really good but...how could it not be? They are only publishing three or four times a year. They have to bring more pieces of writing to publication. Because of this experience and the reflection involved, she came, along with her colleagues to conclusion that in primary grades children need to publish at least 9 times yearly and children in upper grades, as many as 18.

Why a Curriculum for Writing?

We believe that a curriculum in writing:

- **helps teachers create mini lessons that string together and make sense in both the minds of the student and those looking in.**
- **means holding students and self-accountable for a certain number of productions for the year**
- **makes repetitive teaching a possibility**
- **forces us all to become more plan full teachers**
- **helps teachers to be more aware of possibilities for “teachable moments”**

Shared with us a sample of the Curriculum Calendar, showing units of study, generally 2-3 weeks in length. Examples of units of study:

writerly life, alphabet books, craft, letter writing, study of genre, non-fiction, memoir, how to books, nurturing steps of the process,

(see handout)

“The older your students are the fewer genre studies you should have that are genre based.”

Categories for study within writer’s workshop

Writerly Life

Writerly life, matching writing to reading, collaboration/partnerships, peer conferring, writing history, stamina, tools of the trade, a writing process

Craft

craft, language system (punctuation, spelling, grammar, word work etc.), sound (dialogue, word choice), genre (personal narrative, memoir, recipe, letter, poetry, nonfiction, etc.) Structure (story/narrative lists), revision, choosing a mentor author

Steps of the Process

Before: writing from the life you lead, story telling, staying with one idea for a long time, drafting, revising/editing, publishing, celebration

After: gathering around the world (putting stuff in your notebook), choosing a seed idea or a powerful entry, nurturing, drafting, revising, editing, publishing, celebrating, reflecting/assessing

Where to start? Writerly Life

Where to linger? Craft

Initial study--Two days of assessment

I need to know you as a writer, and to do that I need you to write. And children are asked to write, without instructions and to write for about 45 minutes or so. On the second day, the papers are redistributed and the very simple prompt is, I want you to make it better.

Make a two column list, the pro’s and con’s the good and the bad of what each child is doing, reading each piece about three times. Go through all the pieces from your class and continue to add the knew and then what is repeated is simply tallied. Then you look at what is known and not known. Then and only then can a teacher plan appropriate mini lessons.

The curriculum calendar is just a framework and is developed in the previous year. The nuts and bolts, the specific directions within the classrooms are determined by the mini lessons.

Addressing Stamina

1. Stamina

The goal at ANY grade level is to write for a minimum of 30-45 minutes. Remember if any of our children are taking writing assessments, without this ability our children are going to be prepped for failure. This is done with progressive timings.

2. Length of the piece

Need to be able to write longer things. National standards say that all children at the end of the first grade should be able to write a whole page. How is this done? Teaching a child to stretch their piece.

3. Being able to stay with idea and structure across an entire piece. (Craft)

This is the hardest one to teach because it involves craft. Lessons are going to structured around recognizes the structure of a piece.

Narrative vs non-narrative

List or story

To enable a writer to stay on a structure within the writing, the writer needs to know what his or her structure is. Then he or she can make an active decision to stay within that structure. (??Know the rules to break the rules??)

Sharon Creech, Love That Dog

Using a Notebook, what does that look like?

Takes kids on a notebook tour, shows them, the kids are noticing, noticing all the little characteristics about the notebook. Spend about three days working on the notebook to show who the notebooks belong to. Get those kids really lusting to write, just lusting to write, and then someone is just dying to write and asks and then, oh, we write, we write. Isoke hides in her own writing from the sea of waving hands. And then they start getting stuff. And they need to get the stuff, observing, listing, etc., etc. and then to show them how this becomes the seed of real writing. It is a seed bed for our writing. Every single seed you have you don't plant.

Jasmine's Notebook
Donovan's Word Jar

“Writers always have something to write with and something to write on.” Isoke Nia

“If you breath, if you live, you have something to write about.” Graves

“Writers only have a few things to write about and the sooner you learn them...” Murray

*Plan units which allow children
To choose both topic and genre
To choose topic within genre*

That is the hardest thing to let go of, is the aboutness. In writing workshop you are studying writing and that is the topic. You can choose the aboutness during topic related study.

The stuff of nurturing is hard but it’s smart. Once you get a good seed, guys, you have to take care of it.

She spoke of nurturing these ideas through playful exploration within the notebook, the stretching of the ideas. Ideas like writing about the seed from a sensory point of view. Nurturing is “thinking something”, and when it is time to make something, then it is time to step out of the notebook and onto the page.

How does this look like in the lower primary grades? It is oral, it is talking, talking, talking. The processes are not much different but the child is not held accountable for the recording.

“There is no idea that can’t be made into almost anything.”

Rigor--a writerly life study later in the year, rejuvenation and getting them going, reminding them of their plans and their tools, a matter of reteaching.

List Books

Opposites I like pizza, I like pop, I don’t like cauliflower

Adjective list I like pizza, I like pop, I like pizza the most

Question ending I like pizza, I like pop, Do you?

The marks you make personally, they have to have meaning. The only reason to move to convention--and children have to know it--is so that writing can be shared!!

TALKING ABOUT THE ROLE OF ‘WRITING ‘ IN KINDERGARTEN, ALSO TALKING ABOUT ACCEPTING ANY LEVEL OF WRITING THAT HAS MEANING BEHIND IT.

How to respond to the question from a child “What does this say?” in relationship to their own writing. “I don’t know, Sammy, you wrote it. What does it mean?”

Writing History

The stories that you tell and the artifacts that you have that speak to your writerly life.

Also studying the writing history of other writing.

Speaking of Journals, by Paula Graham

To talk about the history of a writer as a keeper of a notebook.

Embrace Trouble!

Quality

Better writing means, my students and I:

√ **have a strong sense of envisionment**

√ **have a lot of contact with good writing**

√ **read aloud - stopping to notice the craft of writing**

I want to be amazed not just by the story but by the craft.

√ **study particular authors for long period of time**

√ **create structures that force us to notice good writing when we are reading on our own**

√ **engage in a study of good writing over time**

√ **value revision**

Spoke of Toni Morrisons saying that the very best part of writing, the very best part is going back to it, that the revision is very best part of it! Getting it to look like it is just perfect!

√ **create strategies for try out noticing ‘s’**

√ **use our notebooks as a place to study and to play with craft**

•Rigor is not just about more but about better

Genres which Nia does not recommend using for the study of writing craft--not in writer’s workshops.

Folk and Fairy Tales

Legends and Myths

Biography and Autobiography

Personal Narrative in any grade above 2 (not widely held, very personal conviction)

Why not?

Because fairy tales are a dead genre in writing.

Because folk tales are written by the folk, it is the recording of a story that has been told and retold and has lived long lives before it was written down.

Because legends and myths have the purpose of our being on earth, we know longer lean into those things to explain how we got to be. They have a place in other areas of day, the reading workshop, social studies, science, and so on.

Because autobiographies are birth to death stories and birth to fame stories. None of our children have achieved this.

Because biography is simply not writing at this age level. The true work of a biographer takes years and years...not a few minutes at a computer or an hour in the library.

Because beyond third grade, story elements are taught in fiction. Personal narratives that happen in spite of the focus are “true stories”.

Fiction waits until third grade.

Why? Up until this point, story elements are addressed in the context of personal narratives.

Planes and hospitals are two places where they tell you to go sleep and then they bother you. (Ha, ha!--Isoko)

Always, One day beginning

Named the kind of craft that Patrica Polacco uses in Chicken Sunday.

This time it was described as a revision lesson, as the children had already written their beginnings, had the children go to their writing and identify their beginnings as either always or one day and then write the other into their beginning.

Revision is about teaching children that revision is about having a try and children have to be held accountable to the trying. They can choose the one they like best. We are not teaching to the piece but to the ability to write...it is the building of repertoire. And we need to make a big deal out of it. A notebook is a place to play and to study craft.

Yucca Ducca Droonie

Described as just a really fun, fun, fun way to play with language.

Genre Exists!

Nonfiction

Editorial (Which would include persuasive)

Essay

How to...

Memoir

Feature Article

Labels

Signs

In kindergarten, take the children on a nonfiction walk to find all the elements of the nonfiction in their world.

Poetry

haiku
rhyme
cinquain
free verse

Picture Book (Both a genre and a form)

wordless
with words

Fiction

fantasy
fairy tale
realistic fiction
science fiction
historical fiction

*Genre is flexible, It does not lie evenly and neat. It can be form as well. The genre is the purpose of the writing, the structure can be form.

Look for some work by Angela Johnson,
she is the colored in version of Cynthia Rylant

Baseball, Snakes and Summer Squash (Graves)

What is the difference between genre and topic study

Genre: *Writing like 'ers'*

- Inquiry into KIND of text
- the class shares a collection of pieces of writing in the chosen genre (early on in the purist forms early on and with increasing sophistication as children age and grow)
- focus is on the process of thinking and the qualities of good writing unique to this genre
- one genre for class

- students choose their own topics, usually individually

Topic: *Writing like 'ists'*

- inquiry into a SINGLE
- the class shares a collection of information as in: experts, articles, poems and stories, trips and other first hand experiences, videos, photos, posters
- focus is on strategies
- one topic
- self-selected genre for related writing topic (one topic, many genres), but it does need to make sense, to feel read and the end product may not be written

“The things I have learned about reading, I turn around and use in my writing. The more I read and the more I see what works for other writers, the more I learn about my own writing...”

Walter Dean Myers, 2001

A genre exploration begins with noticing the characteristics of each genre, exploring these questions:

Do each of these have a particular look?

Do each of these have a certain topic?

Do each of these have a particular look?

Looking closely at the books which fall into this category, what do you notice in terms of craft?

This is done on a charted table, over a period of time and is a cooperative exploration among small groups. Why is this done?

Because we want children to publish across genres using the same idea. Why? Because, you, the writer, you are in charge of genre!

We send them off to do some “try it’s”, and we ask these children to then use the same idea within 2 (primary) or 3 (upper) genres.

What to consider as you are planning curriculum:

Memoir/vignette

In My Momma's Kitchen

Flora and Tiger, 19 Short Stories From My Life (Carle)

These curriculum planners are not written in stone and must be flexible.

Best Guess Gathering--happens before the study begins, has to do with the overlapping and interweaving of study. Has to do with the alternating of craft and process with genre studying. It does not involve defining the genre but the invitation to the children to find what they believe to fit within this genre. This is a hand over hand shared search in the lowest primary grades. We talk around it, we look at, we collect it...we do not define it. The goal is a big pile of stuff, and some of what is collected may not fit the genre and that is okay!!

Immersion--THE ACTUAL PHYSICAL AND IN CLASS BEGINNING What has been collected is distributed to groups where the children are invited to look just at the outsides of the books. Why? We want to say smart things about the genre based on the outside of the texts. Older students will begin a big, fat list and everybody's list is going to look something like this:

- Memoir looks like
- Memoir sometime have...

And so on. She demonstrated this by using three bottles of water.

- Water bottles are see through
- Water bottles have labels
- Water bottles have different kinds of lids

And continue with a very detailed list of the noticings. When discussing the look of the books that is exactly the sort of thing that we want children to do.

As she makes these stacks, the selection of these is quite deliberate and has to do with more detailed differences or sub-qualities of the genre, along with a bit of what does not fit. Finding what does not fit is a bit like the old Sesame Street game, One of These Things Just Doesn't Belong Here but it is really important that children be asked to explain the differences. Make sure that there are multiple memoirs from a single author. Get in lots of little subtle subgroupings.

Do not say real or true when discussing nonfiction.

Lots of memoir books have the word my on the cover.

Memoir seems to be about family (and children have to prove it using the text that is front of them)

The pictures on the book mostly have pictures of a child on them.

Nonfiction books come in different sizes.

Some come in color, some come in black and white.

Some nonfiction books get awards.

Some have photographs and some have realistic drawings.

Nonfiction writing can be about anything.

Poetry is nonfiction.

And the discussion is leading, leading trying to get the kids to come to a deeper understanding of text.

ex. Memoirs probably have something to do with the definition of genre, gathering a list, gathering, gathering, gathering!

We are engaging children in the act of inquiry and inquiry must begin with their own understandings.

“Your reasons for doing what you’re doing in your room are what is important to me.”
Isoke Nia, 2002

When children begin a genre study, their writing is self-selected and not intended to be inside the genre. They don’t know enough about the genre to be asked to write within it.

Coming back to the sorts--working with the same materials, ask children to sort into three piles. Think harder and harder about how to do this.

Ruby, she shared your Dionni’s book about chitterlings.

This period of immersion lasts from two to five days and the second day is the opening of the texts.

Sifting--This is the time when some of the books or samples from the genre study which are separated or sifted out. And beyond this we are going to sift out those specific subcategories which are not what we intend to write.

First Sort: does not belong

Second Sort: fits genre, but not to the specific degree that we are going to attempt to write

Third Sort: teacher just plain doesn’t like it for whatever reason,
THIS SORT IS ALL ABOUT THE TEACHER, PERIOD!!!

All that should be left in this last text is very precisely the exact type of writing that we are going to teach the kids.

In order to get to this,

A definition is the enclosing of a wilderness of idea in a wall of words. Samuel Butler

So, the children need a list or criteria for exactly what the children are going to be sorting for.

As an example, see page 18 from the handout, which defines different areas within nonfiction.

An essay is a journey of thought, I take you with me as we travel together.

Throughout this process of sifting and sorting, each group continues to work with the same piles of books!!

What to do with the babies...

Explained how she would sort of imagine what one member of the class would look like if we could look through different windows of the house--what would we see, what wouldn't we see? And help children gain an understanding of lens through this discussion but would also include a discussion of lens (glasses, binoculars, cameras, and so on).

What she does with older kids...

Using various text which explain this, reduced to the size to fit into the notebook.

Immersion-- reimmersion with very specific, single texts of the touchtone and that is done with typed or photocopied text.

Touchtone Try Its-- children are now beginning to think about "their thing" that will be within this genre. (Three or four days)

Writing-- then becomes something done quickly, (Maybe five days tops). Includes process writing.

Isoke Nia

Heinneman

Look for her new book sometime soon

Is That A Fact?

memoir--

Is not personal narrative. Memoir has a lense. You are only looking at a piece of someone's life. It ends beyond the story and is reflective. The structure of memoir can narrative or non-narrative.

Example of a non-narrative memoir

When I Was Young In The Mountains Rylant

It is a list books, how do you know? The events can be read in ANY ORDER. When done in this way, look for repeated beginning of sentences AND vignettes.

As defined by first graders, reflection is the writer looking back or the writer looking forward.

The beginning and the end hook together as if there is no middle at all! They stand alone together, a short, sweet story.

With the little guys, you can write the beginning and the ends.

And what is the tough part? You have to decide where the beginning ends and the end begins. When this decision has been made well, it fits together.

Little Guy Memoirs (Need to write episodic):

Donald Crews

Shortcut Episodic

Big mama Across Time (Bigger picture, somehow condensed)

When I Was Young Joyce Cowley

Shortcut is inside Big Mama because memoir can be episodic--that is it just about a single event. Vignette form is across time. A third kind of memoir is about "all my whatevers" as representative memoir by writing of just one whatever.

The lens of a memoir is always:

person or animal place thing idea or event

When looking a memoir, you always need to identify the lens.

Gathering Memories "camera moments"

When writing memoirs with little guys, the kids get a little book which is a memory book. The children collect pictures or drawings from their lives. They are not stand alone items but must be reflected in the stories of the children. (Written or told)

*sometimes when little children write memoirs, the reflection is not on the page

When writing memoirs with older kids, children hold their memories with words, not necessarily lots of words, but in text.

The child then picks a single memory (episode) and expands this--says a lot about it.

There is always one moment in childhood where the doors open and let the future in...

some really smart person that Isoke liked (and did not know)

I, me, us, we, our --the I words and memoirs are most often written in first person and when writing with younger kids, memoirs are always written in first person.

Isoke tells her little ones that the m-e in memoirs is me because memoirs are all about me, me, me---it's all about me.

Sweet Summers, Growing Up With and Without My Dad,
Bebe Campbell

Memory is a tricky thing, not to be trusted.
Annie Dillard

In a memoir the "lens" is little known and the "I" richly defined.

Any genre that is being written often and well is a valid genre for study.