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Practitioner Article

Culturally Sustaining Writer's Workshop for Beginners

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the implementation of a writer's workshop as a culturally sustaining practice, allowing students to exercise agency in their learning and writing. The workshop follows a structured flow of read-alouds, modeling, an invitation to write, and sharing. Teachers choose specific writing skills or crafts to teach, incorporating culturally relevant literature that exemplifies those skills. Students are encouraged to write in their own languages and explore diverse story structures while also learning dominant forms of writing. The article emphasizes the importance of linguistic diversity and challenges the notion that only dominant English should be taught. Step-by-step guidance is provided to start a writer's workshop, including book selection, modeling, and supporting students' individual stories. The writer's workshop aims to position students as active subjects in the instructional process, allowing them to express themselves while developing conventional writing skills. The article encourages teachers to begin with the suggested lessons and adapt them to meet the needs of their students to create a culturally sustaining classroom.

KEYWORDS

writer's workshop; culturally sustaining pedagogy; linguistic diversity; mentor texts; agency in learning

In a time of scripted curricula and packaged programs, the writer's workshop continues to offer a space for students to be an agentive part of their classroom. In a writer's workshop, students have choice and autonomy over their own learning and production. I am a university professor of language and literacy. I collaborated with two fourth, fifth, and sixth-grade Language Arts teachers to begin a culturally sustaining process of discussing, creating, thinking, writing, and sharing. This article is designed to share our process with others in hopes that more teachers can get started. Getting started was very hard for these two teachers, as reflected by the sixth-grade teacher when she stated, "I kind of felt like I was jumping into stuff that I really wasn't 100% sure of what I was doing, but I enjoy the process and value it." The teachers were admittedly nervous about letting go of control and letting the children lead; however, when they did let go, the students and teachers ended up in a learning space they never expected.

When Paris (2012) set out to expand on the concept of culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2009) to the idea of being culturally sustaining, he described that teachers must "support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence" (p. 95). A writer's workshop provides the space for students to use, practice, and play with their own stories, languages, and literacies while also learning more dominant forms of the written word in order to access the competence and power of which Paris speaks. The teacher must model, teach, reinforce, and praise diverse cultural and linguistic stories and forms of writing to elevate them.

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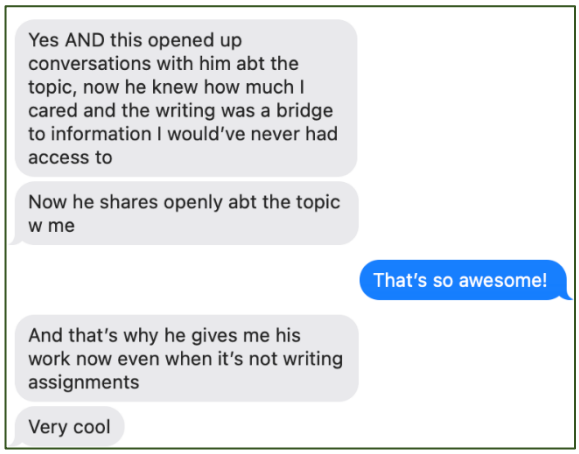
Too often, students are told by their teachers explicitly and implicitly that their stories and home languages do not belong in the classroom. The fourth and fifth-grade teacher shared, "I have learned so much more about them than in other spaces. For example, one student's dad is in prison, and I knew that. But in his writing, he wrote about him, and he hadn't talked about him before." Following that conversation, the teacher shared that they have a better relationship because of this writing. The text exchange (Figure 1) shows how different their relationship is now.

Figure 1: Text Message Exchange



This article will share how writing is a perfect space to enhance (or even begin) your path toward being more culturally sustaining in your classroom practices. The following section includes three suggested ways to implement a more culturally sustaining workshop: through book choice, story structure, and linguistic diversity. The following section has concrete tips on how to get started with your workshop. Being culturally sustaining inherently means that you know the community in which you teach and that you adapt based on your students for the year or even class period. This school was in the Southeast United States in a majority Black neighborhood. The neighborhood is predominantly low-income; however, the school enrolls students from all over the community. The students and families mainly speak African American Language, and many have lived in this small neighborhood community for decades. All these cultural aspects matter to being culturally sustaining. Readers of this article must consider their school's communities and cultures and adapt accordingly.

Book Choice

Students must see themselves reflected in the books they read (Bishop, 2012) and by the authors they read to identify with them. Choose books with stories your students might have experienced, with characters or plots they can relate to, and have ideas that connect to their beliefs (Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1: Writing from Memories (Based on a Mini-Lesson in Jacobson, 2010)

Step		Time Allotted	Details
1.	**Set Goal**	1 minute	"Today, we will learn how to write a story from our own memories."
2.	**Mentor Text**	10 minutes	Read or have a student read aloud *She Come Bringing Me That Little Baby Girl* (1974) by Eloise Greenfield.
3.	**Anchor Chart**		(none)
4.	**Model**	2 minutes	(Think aloud) "Now I have to think of my own memory. I don't have a baby sibling, so I can't relate to that one, but I do remember a time when my parents told me that my brother was moving out. I think I'll write that story."
5.	**Invite**	15 minutes	"Discuss a few memories with your neighbor; which one is a good story to tell that others might find interesting? What format do you want to tell it in? (Graphic novel, poem, picture book?) Get started on that story or finish what you were working on and write a

			memory story later. Add it to your topic list so you don't forget, though!"

Table 2: Choosing Better Words – Adjectives

Step		Time Allotted	Details
1.	**Set Goal**	2 minutes	"In your writing, you want to choose words that give your writing interest and strength. Today, we are going to talk about adjectives."
2.	**Mentor Text**		*The Undefeated* (2019) by Kwame Alexander (*read aloud at another time before teaching this lesson*)
3.	**Anchor Chart**	10 minutes	Prepare a chart with the word "adjective" and a kid-friendly definition (something we add to a noun to describe it better). Define it for the students and ask them to listen while you read. After you read *The Undefeated*, ask kids to suggest adjectives they heard. Go through pages and discuss how Kwame Alexander leaves off the noun, but the adjectives speak loudly.
4.	**Model**	3 minutes	"In my writing today, I am going to circle a few of my nouns and then figure out how to describe them better." Using teacher writing from the memory lesson, circle a few nouns and think aloud how to add adjectives to them.
5.	**Invite**	5 minutes of writing	Invite students to find a few nouns in their writing to add adjectives and then continue with their stories or start new ones.

Story Structure

Many examples of culturally sustaining writing practices have been documented. Delpit (2006) observed how there is no ending in Arapaho storytelling. Endings represent the end of life, which they do not believe in. The teachers in this community did not understand this initially and were correcting students who did not wrap up their stories with traditional endings. Eventually, the teachers understood this cultural practice and adjusted their teaching. Delpit (2006) also documented how many Black students she observed told: "'episodic' narratives—stories that include shifting scenes and are typically longer" while the white students told "'topic-centered' narratives- stories that focused on one event" (p. 55). These examples show the importance of teaching writing organization in various ways. Students deserve to learn a story's "beginning/middle/end" structure to succeed on a standardized test. However, they must also have space to structure their stories in ways that sustain and celebrate the storytelling styles of their communities (Tables 3, 4, and 5).

Ordoñez-Jasis and Flores (2011) showed how the Latinx families they observed often engaged in oral storytelling and wordplay. As a result of understanding this cultural norm, teachers explicitly worked to change their classrooms by committing "themselves to centralize the songs, ghost and love stories, pretend play, and rhyme that families engaged in" (p. 133).

Table 3: Story Structure Lesson 1 – Thematic Organization

Step		Time Allotted	Details
1.	**Set Goal**	2 minutes	"Sometimes writing is about a theme or topic instead of a beginning, middle, and end that flows from one event to another. We will read *Love,* written by Matt de la Peña, and see if you can identify how he used theme to write his book."
2.	**Mentor Text**	10 minutes	*Love* (2018) by Matt de la Peña

3.	**Anchor Chart**	10 minutes	Put the word "love" in the middle of the chart, then identify all the ways that he shows and describes love in the book. Do they need to be in one order or another? Not necessarily.
4.	**Model**	3 minutes	"In my writing today, I am going to think of a concept like love and see if I can describe it in many different ways. I'm going to write about my neighborhood. There's no organization to the people, events, and feelings in my neighborhood; I am just going to describe them."
5.	**Invite**	5 minutes of writing	"Today, I invite you to write a thematic story if you aren't in the middle of something else. Map it out, then get started."

Table 4: Story Structure Lesson 2 – Beginning-Middle-End Organization *(Fletcher & Portalupi, 2007)*

Step		Time Allotted	Details
1.	**Set Goal**	2 minutes	"Today, we are going to try to spread out our story from beginning to middle, to end. Let's revisit the story, *Hair Love*, to see how the author did it."
2.	**Mentor Text**		*Hair Love* (2019) by Matthew Cherry (*read aloud at another time before teaching this lesson*)
3.	**Anchor Chart**	10 minutes	As you revisit the story with students, map out Hair Love's beginning, middle, and end across three pages (sketch pictures, add a few words, etc.). Discuss how you want to stretch out the events to make a more detailed story.
4.	**Model**	3 minutes	"In my writing today, I am going to tell a story across three pages." Write a simple story about something that happened with a clear beginning, middle, and end.
5.	**Invite**	15 minutes of writing	Pass out three pages labeled "beginning, middle, and end" and invite them to sketch and write their own story.

Table 5: Story Structure Lesson 3 – Circular Organization

Step		Time Allotted	Details
1.	**Set Goal**	2 minutes	"Sometimes stories are not organized with a beginning, middle, and end. You have a choice to organize your story in different ways. One way is called the circular organization, where your story returns to the beginning at the end. Poetry is often written this way; let's examine this poem."
2.	**Mentor Text**		*Poem to (F.S.)* (1925) by Langston Hughes I loved my friend. He went away from me. There's nothing more to say. The poem ends, Soft as it began— I loved my friend.
3.	**Anchor Chart**	10 minutes	Write the poem on the chart and ask students to comment on how it is "circular" and what makes it work to be circular (not all stories work this way). Elicit ideas about topics that do not have to have a beginning, middle, or end. Make the distinction between event stories and feelings topics to help them.
4.	**Model**	3 minutes	"In my writing today, I will write about my mom. Our relationship does not necessarily have a beginning or an end; things just change. I am going to write a poem like Hughes."

5.	**Invite**	15 minutes of writing	"Today, I encourage you to try this out if it works for your topic or if you want to start something new."

Linguistic Diversity

Teachers often think they must teach their students dominant English (sometimes called "correct" English, subliminally implying other languages are incorrect). As Delpit (2006) described, teachers are responsible for teaching students dominant forms of speaking and writing to access the power structures that expect them (job interviews, apartment hunting, etc.). However, in a culturally sustaining classroom and our broader society, dominant English is just one way to speak and write. In a writer's workshop, students craft their stories as their own; thus, all languages and literacies are welcome. Teachers might choose to teach a mini-lesson on dialogue and instruct students to make their characters speak in ways that accurately reflect the person depicted, practicing writing in both dominant English as well as other languages and dialects (Table 6).

Tip: An important distinction for teachers to recognize is the idea that a usage (spelling, convention, phrasing) must be shared amongst a group of its speakers to be a part of that culture or community. For example, spelling the word /ask/ as /aks/ is a very common, shared usage and, therefore, a correct way to spell and say that word in African American Language. If a student is a Spanish speaker at home and chooses to write in Spanish or a mixture of Spanish and English, that likely represents their community's real usage and is correct.

Table 6: Dialogue Mini-Lesson

Step		Time Allotted	Details
1.	**Set Goal**	2 minutes	"Today in your writing, I want you to consider how the narrator speaks and if it reflects how they might really sound in real life."
2.	**Mentor Text**		Chapter 1, *The Skin I'm In* (1998) by Sharon Flake
3.	**Anchor Chart**	10 minutes	Before the lesson, prepare three columns labeled Teacher Voice, Maleeka's Voice, and John-John's Voice. As you read chapter one, write the dialogue in each column. After reading the entire chapter, in a different color marker, add notes about what you learn or can picture about the character from the way they talk (Teacher is formal, "excuse me," John-John teases a lot "ba-boom," and Maleeka is casual "that-a-way.")
4.	**Model**	3 minutes	"In my writing today, I am going to make sure that I include dialogue and that it sounds like my brother and me." Model adding two sentences to my memories story.
5.	**Invite**	15 minutes of writing	"Today, I would like you to think about how your characters would talk, what you want us to learn about them from their talking, then include a quote or two."

Steps to Start

Each writer's workshop lesson follows the same basic flow as shown in the examples above: read aloud, modeling, an invitation to write, writing, and then sharing out (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001; Jacobsen, 2010). First, teachers read a story or excerpt and point out the skill. Next, they model putting it into their own writing. Last, they invite students to try out that skill in their writing sometime soon and set them off to write. At the end, everyone comes back together, and a few students share and get feedback.

Tip: Even with high schoolers, I predominantly use picture books and poems. When students are first starting, they are intimidated and modeling a skill in a novel subliminally sends the message they must write a novel.

First, pick the writing skill or craft you would like to teach. These can be big-picture writing concepts like how to choose a topic or organize a story all the way down to the nitty-gritty of word choice and comma placement. For example, in the Book Choice section above, the craft-type lesson is 'writing from memories' while the skill one is using adjectives. Many teachers struggle to understand what to teach in a writer's workshop because writing is sometimes conceptualized only as skills. For example, a Common Core fifth grade writing standard states, "link ideas within and across categories of information using words, phrases, and clauses." This standard focuses on grammar. Writing is a craft, an art form in a writer's workshop. Writing is taught as a means of expression along with the conventional skills that help the writer convey their thoughts to an audience. I highly recommend any beginner to writer's workshop purchase *Craft Lessons: Teaching Writing K–8* (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2007) for an abundance of mini-lessons and the book *No More "I'm done": Fostering Independent Writers in the Primary Grades* (Jacobson, 2010) for an overview of the workshop along with management tips. However, to be culturally sustaining, you must adapt the lessons and ideas to have culturally relevant read alouds and to be more centered in your students' cultural literacy practices.

Tip: Consider withholding paper in the beginning until they decide on a topic to start. Typically, students see the others starting to write and eventually want a paper to begin their own story.

After you decide on the specific skill you want to teach, you need to find culturally relevant literature that clearly models that skill. You do not have to know a lot of books, and this is a time to use your local school librarians or media specialists, public libraries, and online sites like Diverse Book Finder (diversebookfinder.org). You also do not need to purchase physical books; use free resources (e.g., Netflix's Bookmarks or a plethora of read alouds on YouTube). In the lesson plan below (Table 7), I've included books that have worked well for me in this community. However, you will have to adapt these choices to fit your community's needs and practices. Once you have picked a book, you will read it aloud to your class, explicitly examining the skill the author exemplifies. This is a great time to create anchor charts that you will display as reminders of each mini-lesson.

When the book or excerpt is complete, you will then model how you think about and apply this skill to your own writing. You will fully model this in front of the students. Now, this does not mean you are writing a whole story in front of your class. Perhaps you are working on picking a better start to your story. You could use a story you have previously written in front of them (save all your writing as well as theirs) and model trying out new beginnings until you pick the one you like best.

Tip: When the students are finished simply say "Great! Start another one!" and walk away so they realize writing is a continuous cycle (Jacobson, 2010).

After modeling, you will invite them to try out this new skill in their writing sometime soon. You do not make it mandatory because perhaps that skill does not fit with what they are

working on that day. Suppose you are teaching about dialogue and using quotation marks, but a student is in the middle of writing a descriptive poem. In that case, that student will have to file away that knowledge for a later story (which you and the anchor charts will help them with when it comes to that time). Because students are the producers of the work, workshop teachers do not expect students to work on specific timetables or checklists of skills.

As students write, the teacher is either writing themselves or circulating to help students with their work. Teachers are not endlessly hounding students to get started or providing them with a litany of ideas to write about. Students must come up with their own stories on their own, which sometimes takes a few lessons, but it is essential that they find their voice. Do not be surprised or frustrated with this process; I have yet to see a student NOT write anything.

Tip: Writer's workshop also includes individual conferencing. This is a very important piece to consider once your workshop is flowing. Read further into this topic after getting started.

Invite a few students to share their work in the last few minutes of every single writing period. When students share their writing, they reinforce the writing skill you were teaching by pointing it out or discussing it, celebrate their writing, and encourage reluctant writers to start because they also want this praise and attention. I recommend starting Day 1 with a lesson on genre and format (Table 7).

Table 7: Genre and Format

Step		Time Allotted	Details
1.	**Set Goal**	2 minutes	Tell students they are going to study authors and books in order to understand how to write better.
2.	**Mentor Text**	(Prepare in advance)	For this lesson, set out a range of potential culturally relevant books around their reading levels with different genres and formats along the whiteboard ledge. Examples: ▪ *Black Boy* (1945) by Wright (Autobiography, Novel) ▪ *Hair Love* (2019) by Cherry (Personal/Family Narrative, Picture Book) ▪ *Punching the Air* (2020) by Zoboi and Salaam (Personal Narrative, Novel in Verse) ▪ *Sulwe* (2019) by Nyong'o (Fantasy/Fairytale, Picture Book) ▪ *The Black Panther Party: A Graphic Novel History* (2021) by Walker (Historical Non-Fiction and Graphic Novel) ▪ *Monster* (1999) by Myers (Mystery, Play)
3.	**Anchor Chart**	10 minutes	Prepare the chart with the words "genre" and "format." Define the terms in kid-friendly language. Ask the students to suggest genres and formats they may know and add them to the anchor chart (i.e., add a graphic novel to the format section and historical fiction to the genre section). When the students have exhausted their ideas, examine each anchor book to add that genre and format to the chart.
4.	**Model**	3 minutes	Briefly make your own genre and format chart of what you would like to try in your own writing.
5.	**Invite**	5 minutes of writing	Invite students to make their own genre and format chart of ideas they want to write someday. Save this chart in their writing folders.

Discussion and Conclusion

Because the students in a writer's workshop generate their own stories in their own languages, they will inherently be of their own practices. The culturally sustaining teacher's job is to embrace, celebrate, and expand on these practices while teaching dominant practices that lead to access to

power. The fourth and fifth-grade teacher I worked with reflected, "I wanted them to see that they are the authors; this is not 'read this book and tell me what the right answer is.' In writing, they make the decisions." Her students were gaining agency in the classroom. In 2014, Ladson-Billings described the shift towards culturally sustaining pedagogy, explaining how it "layer[s] the multiple ways that this notion of pedagogy shifts, changes, adapts, recycles, and recreates instructional spaces to ensure that consistently marginalized students are repositioned into a place of normativity—that is, that they become subjects in the instructional process, not mere objects" (p. 76). In a writer's workshop, your pedagogy shifts and adapts so students have that agency and are positioned in the center of instruction.

I encourage you to start here and then read more to grow your workshop. As the teacher in the introduction reflected, starting is one of the hardest parts. I suggest you order a book or two on leading a workshop, such as *No More I'm Done: Fostering Independent Writers in the Primary Grades* (Jacobson, 2010), and simply begin with the suggested lessons in this article. Once you get started, it will be much easier to understand and adapt to best fit the needs of your students!

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