



Lisa Burman

Consulting in Pedagogical Change

Supporting the Reluctant Writer



July 2015

2016 USA Study Tour

REGISTRATIONS ARE NOW OPEN

The 2015 USA Study Tour was a huge success so we are repeating it for next year! This Study Tour will suit you if you are interested in:

Rich, engaging, beautiful learning environments

Inquiry-focussed, playful learning

Children as active protagonists in their learning

Continuity of learning and pedagogy throughout prior-to-school settings and primary schools

Respectful relationships with children and families

[Click here for the full itinerary](#)

Collaborations, Networks and Shared Views of the Child

The first half of 2015 has just disappeared and I apologise for not sharing a new article with you before now. For the past 12 months I have been designing, planning and organizing for our first USA Study Tour, which 18 educators from SA participated in during April. I can hardly believe it is over, but I'm also excited by the possibilities that have emerged!

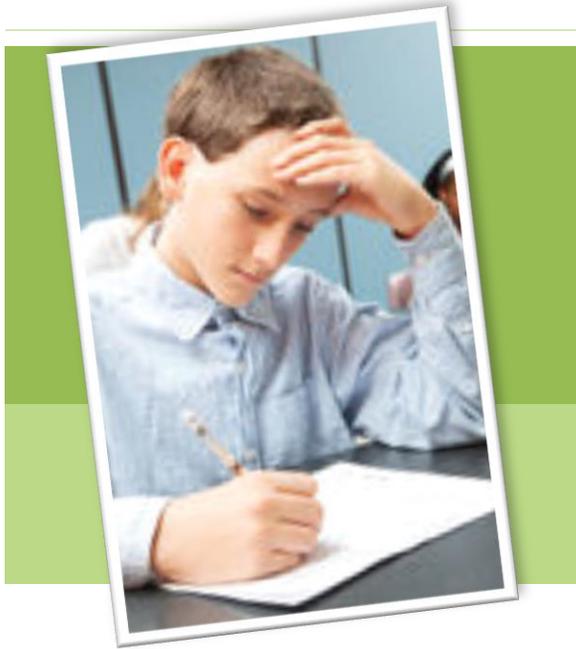
The Study Tour was a time for new relationships to be formed, of rich dialogue and much inspiration! Not only did the Study Tour group form new networks within its members, we forged new professional collaborations with the USA educators we met. Boulder Journey School, The Blue School, Williamsburg Northside School and Brooklyn New School welcomed us, generously gave their time and shared their experiences. We discovered common experiences through the differences and a shared view of the child as a competent, active and powerful learner. The respectful relationships we observed between children and educators were also shown to us as visitors to their communities. I'm so grateful to them all!



This newsletter is focussed on the child as a competent writer. Our most popular mini-courses and workshops remain those concerned with bookmaking, story-tables, writer's notebooks and Writing Workshop. I'm continually encouraged and excited by the stories you share of ways these pedagogies help children to see themselves as writers. I hope you find this short article helpful.

Supporting the Reluctant Writer

Pedagogies that empower children to think like writers create conditions that foster motivation and engagement. But sometimes this fails to hook in *every* child – for a number of possible reasons. Here are some strategies to try and things to consider – it is not exhaustive and should be seen as a starting place for your reflection.



So you are implementing Writing Workshop with your group of young writers. Perhaps you are using a ‘bookmaking approach’ or children write in their Writer’s Notebooks. Maybe you have set up a bookmaking area inside and outside that many of your children choose to engage with during their Kindergarten (prior to school) day. Most children LOVE Writing Workshop – they groan when they have to stop writing and ask you every day if they will have Writing Workshop or Bookmaking that day. But...then there are those one or two children who haven’t yet caught ‘the bug’. What can we do to hook them in and help them to see themselves as writers?

The first question to explore is: “Why might this child not be choosing to write?”

- Does she have a poor image of herself as a writer?
- Does he see writing as something only adults or older children do?
- Does she define good writing as ‘getting all the words right’?
- Does he think his writing needs to look like perfect adult writing?
- Has writing been difficult or less than successful for her in the past?
- Does he have difficulty finding a topic or an idea to write about?
- How much experience has she had with books? Has she been read aloud to regularly and

frequently throughout her early years?

- Are the fine motor demands challenging for him?
- Does she have low stamina because of limited experience with mark-making and drawing?

It is very difficult to teach writing to a child who is doing little or no writing. Without the writing (the process *and* the product) it is impossible to know the next step for this writer and what learning intentions are priorities. We must also consider the WHOLE CHILD and bring together all we know about him/her rather than think about writing in isolation.



This article considers drawing and other mark-making as part of writing. Emergent writers will compose and write through illustrations.

One priority must firstly be to support the child to write – whatever it is, as long as they are writing. Their learning goals need to be concerned with the *habits of a writer* rather than about the mechanics, conventions or structures of writing. These will be addressed once the child is actually writing and most importantly, sees him/herself as a writer.

The kind of teaching that happens early in the year is critical in establishing a supportive climate and culture for writing. It needs to provide different entry points for different kinds of writers. Some writers (whether this is the four year old or ten year old writer) will have a preference and strength for writing memoir or others for factual, informative pieces. Some writers will have a clear vision for their piece from the beginning and others will benefit from sketching and talking first to plan and rehearse. All are valid writing strategies and all need to be valued in your culture of writing– there are many ways to be a writer.

Some of the following often prove problematic for reluctant writers and are offered for your reflection:

- **Children don't know how the writing workshop works.** They don't know what is expected of them, or where to get the materials they need. This could indicate there has been insufficient teaching about the expectations, the 'habits' of a strong writer, how to use and care for bookmaking materials or notebooks, what to do if you get stuck and what to do if you finish a book or an entry in your notebook. Children who begin a new school or class coming from a site that did not use a 'Writing Workshop' pedagogy often feel lost in this way. Thankfully, they will have the strong role models of the other young writers in your class!
 - **Children don't understand the purpose for writing.** Ensure there is a reason for writing – to read to a writing buddy each week, to add to the class library, to publish on a class blog or website. Give children's writing a bigger life than just writing workshop time and in their notebooks/folders.
 - **Children don't have choice in topics.** Reluctant writers will not miraculously decide to write when topics are always assigned or provided to them.
- They are more likely to find the motivation to write when they can choose to write about something that is meaningful to them. We need to teach children strategies that writers use to generate and harvest ideas – how they observe and notice, collecting thoughts in their writer's notebooks, how they write about things they know a lot about, about things that happen to them...and to make their reader laugh, or cry, feel surprised or to learn something new.
- **Children find the one sheet of paper they are given uninspiring.** Making books often stimulates a reluctant writer who wants to make something larger than a single sheet of paper. They can work on this over a few days. Books allow bigger thinking. They understand that they are using pictures AND words to convey a message and not drawing just because they 'can't write yet'. It also appeals to the innate desire children seem to have to 'make stuff'.
 - **Children don't know how to think, work and talk like a writer.** There has not been enough modelling and thinking aloud for these children to know the secret business that happens inside a writer's head. Some reluctant writers may not have sufficient immersion in the work of a writer to know what to do. Model, model, model how you think like a writer. Writing project and co-authoring can also help.
 - **The planning structure is too tight.** Sometimes when the writing process begins with a tight structure, like a recount or narrative graphic organiser, the reluctant writer feels they cannot do the task. It limits them or asks them to do the think they find difficult (ie: write) first. Look for other ways to plan, develop ideas and rehearse through oral language, role-play and drawing. Often the planning process is such a big task for these writers that they just 'run out of puff' and do not have energy left to continue to with the bigger writing.
 - **Every piece is published.** The reluctant writer might start the whole writing process with feelings of dread because this one piece will be read and re-read, edited, marked and published. Perhaps s/he doesn't really care about the topic or this particular book or entry, so s/he is not motivated

to put that much energy into it. Perhaps the process feels so long and arduous that just starting seems too daunting. Writers need time to play around with their writing without the pressure to get it right the first time or to produce a publish-worthy piece every time they write.

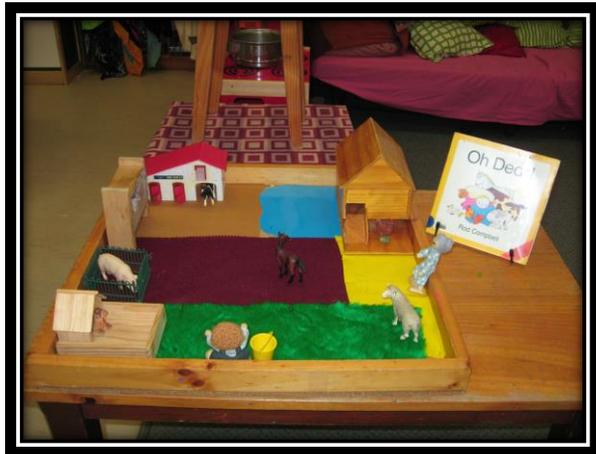
- **Children define ‘good writing’ as getting all the words correct.** Good spelling does not equal good writing. These children are too focussed on the end product. Ensure they have seen you and other writers engage in the lovely messiness of composing and writing: making mistakes, crossing out, changing your mind or being unsure. Model, model, model. Teach strategies that brave writers/spellers use so they do their best spelling, don’t get stuck on the spelling of a tricky word.
- **There’s not enough talk about books and writing.** A writing workshop that understands the importance of talk immerses children in thinking and talking about the process of writing and about the decisions a writer makes. The teacher uses specific vocabulary (meta-language) and asks open-ended questions that show genuine interest in the children’s *thinking* as writers. Reluctant writers can be drawn into writing by a culture of thinking and a culture of conversation that provides opportunities every day to talk and listen to others talk about their writing. Focus the talk on the thinking and strategies used (ie: the process) rather than *only* the text features and conventions used (product).
- **Children are challenged by the fine motor skills required for making books/writing in a notebook.** Of course books can be made electronically, but for young writers who do not yet have keyboarding skills, this could take longer than a hand-made book. Older writers may find writing electronically is a more efficient option for them – if they have typing skills. (I do almost all of my writing electronically now – using paper for planning and sometimes researching and noting ideas that will be developed. The drafting, revising and editing all happen electronically.) There is something to be said for the physicality of making paper books and turning a page for the next idea or deciding that this is exactly the place to put an ellipsis...so the surprise is on the next page for the

reader. Similarly, a portable notebook that is able to travel with a writer to collect ideas and thoughts is, I think, preferable. Once you move to drafting a more developed idea from your notebook, however, it’s often more efficient and effective to move to typing. So don’t be afraid to combine technologies. For young writers who find fine motor tasks like writing a challenge, ensure you provide many play opportunities throughout the day to develop muscle control and core strength. Playdough, clay, threading, sewing, drawing as well as gross motor play that includes climbing and balancing all work together to develop fine motor skills.



- Children have limited experience with books and being read TO. How often is s/he read to? There is a huge difference between a five year old who has been read an average of, say, one book a day since they were one, and a five year old who has only been read to occasionally and perhaps only once they began Kindergarten. We can’t expect them to be the same readers and writers in their first few years of school – yet we do. Immerse these children in being read to as often as possible. This is one of the strongest ways they learn the whole reason for books, for reading, for writing; how they the ways books work, the patterns of language, phonological awareness and how they develop a love of words and language. Why should I write if I don’t even know what books are about or why you would want to read one? Story-tables are another ways to engage children with books. Setting up small

world play-props with familiar texts allows children a place to play the story, revisit the language patterns, develop concepts about print and most importantly experience joy of reading.



- **Children do not have a clear vision for their writing.** Who are they writing for? Who will read/view it? What kind of book will it be? Many children find it very helpful to know where they are in the whole writing process. You can display the process on cards (ie: idea development, planning, drafting, revising, editing, publishing) and children place their name on the card that names the writing they are doing that day. This helps them see where they are going and gives a sense of purpose and direction. How often are you publishing? Whilst not every piece needs to be formally published (see earlier note), there is a place for 'quick' or informal publishing (perhaps by reading it aloud or making a podcast or video of the read aloud) so that children get feedback from their readers and a sense of satisfaction from polishing something to share. Don't underestimate the power of helping children learn the value of putting effort into something. Provide a place and time for children to regularly read their writing to each other and to 'quick' publish (ie: make public) in ways that don't always require re-writing or presentation of a written product.

Work with the writer not the writing.

What strategies will help this writer?

A strategy to use not just with this one piece/book but a strategy s/he can use with future writing also.

Current Workshops

Places still available as of 24 July

Click on title to register via Eventbrite

Effective Mini Lessons in the Writing Workshop (R-7)

Thursday 3 August 4:30 – 6:30pm

Introduction to Bookmaking

Ages 3-8 Mini Course

Saturday 8 August 9:30 – 3:00pm

Thursday 27 August 4:30 – 6:30pm

Thursday 17 September 4:30 – 6:30pm

Six Traits of Writing

Saturday 5 September 9:30 – 3:00pm

Making and Tinkering – Playful Learning

Thursday 10 September 4:30 – 6:30pm

Children as Researchers – Capturing Children's Theories Mini Course

Saturday 12 September 9:30 – 3:00pm

Thursday 15 October 4:30 – 6:30pm

Thursday 12 November 4:30 – 6:30pm

Literacy of Play & Power of our Words

Saturday 19 September 9:30 – 1:00pm