

This is a transcript of the T/TAC William and Mary podcast “Lisa Emerson: Writer’s Workshop”

[MUSIC: T/TAC William and Mary Podcast Intro]

Lee Anne SULZBERGER: So, hello, I’m sitting here with Lisa Emerson, who is a specialist at T/TTAC William and Mary, and most recently was the instructional consultation team facilitator at a school in Stafford. So, Lisa, welcome and thank you so much for joining us today.

Lisa EMERSON: Thank you for inviting me.

SULZBERGER: We’re gonna talk about Writer’s Workshop and just kind of your experiences with it and for people who may not be familiar with what Writer’s Workshop is-- what’s it look like in the classroom, what makes a Writer’s Workshop?

EMERSON: Really, the main, I guess, focus of a Writer’s Workshop is that students are writing all the time on authentic writing, from their own ideas, so I think that’s what makes it different than what you’d see sometimes in classrooms. There may be some... prompts, but they’re very kind of open-ended prompts, so the kids are really working on... writing that is important to them, and that comes from their own prior knowledge and their background, so you’ll see a lot of active engagement, kids are all kind of... working on their own levels, they may be in a different part of the process, so you’ll see just kind of like a really, you know, like a workshop, like kids are all kind of at their levels working together, sometimes in pairs conferencing, um, the teachers conferencing with students, teachers writing, too, which is really important. So the teacher is a writer, too.

SULZBERGER: And, when I was... looking at it, one of the things I saw was this idea of a mini-lesson (mm-hmm), and it’s not necessarily every time you do the Writer’s Workshop. What are some of those mini-lessons that you would do as a teacher or that would help kids do this writing process in the Writer’s Workshop?

EMERSON: The mini-lessons are really nice cause they’re, they’re based on what the kids are working on, so first, your first mini-lessons might be just... ‘What is Writer’s Workshop?’, so the kids have the expectations. What makes the Writer’s Workshop very successful is that there’s a structure, and once you get into that, you’re looking at, from your conferences, what the children need to work on. So, if they’re having difficulty organizing paragraphs, you do a mini-lesson—fifteen, twenty minutes on organization. If they need to generate ideas, um, they’re kinda getting stuck with that brainstorming, then you would do... a mini-lesson... in that area, if you need to develop more voice in their writing. So it’s really kind of a give-and-take, you know, depending on, um, the needs of the students and what they’re currently writing.

SULZBERGER: If I were coming into your classroom as a new student, and I had never experienced what Writer’s Workshop is, what would you tell me about what that structure looks

like, if I didn't know what to expect as, say, a fifth-grader coming in or an eighth-grader coming in?

EMERSON: Most of the time it would start with... a mini—a mini-lesson. So some, you know, some focus, and then they have their independent writing time, so there'd be a lot of time where they'd have their journals and they'd have different writings that they may be possibly working on, and so they'll have time to kind of explore and do some writing and apply it. So the idea is that you're giving them the information, you're teaching them about it, and then they get to actually apply it in their own writing, you know, explore with it, have conferences, and then we come back together at the end, and discuss, you know, where you're at, what did you find exciting, what did you learn, um, what are you planning on doing next, and then if students are... published, they can share, which is a really good way for the kids to kind of motivate that creativity so they can, you know, maybe do a similar, a similar writing, based on *their* interests.

SULZBERGER: What were the ways that they were publishing their writing?

EMERSON: It could be a, a variety of ones, what I really enjoy doing, and it's—it's very simple, is just doing, um, bringing in photographs from home because it, you really get that, that kind of that personal connection and kids just have a wealth of information. You find out so much, you know, so many interesting things about, um, the students with their likes, and so it's a real simple kind of project where they can just bring a picture of anything, and then they write, and we help them structure their writing to go along with the photograph. That's one of my favorite ones, cause it's kind of, you get to know the kids, and they get to know each other, so that's a good way I like to start the year.

SULZBERGER: If a teacher wanted to try this, what were some of the things you learned, cause it sounds like there's a big management piece (mmmhm) to it... *how* in the world did you get everything straight, and what would you tell teachers to keep all the different parts of Writer's Workshop, cause it sounds like you've got conferencing going on, you've got kids working on projects, there's probably some peer-editing going on (mmmhm), so what is a good tip for teachers to keep everything straight? What worked for you?

EMERSON: When I had first started, it was in a collaborative classroom, so that was, I mean the collaboration was really key, so we did it together, even though we did, I did the Writer's Workshop, the other teacher did the Reading workshop, and actually putting myself in the student's shoes was really... helpful, helped me organize it, too. So... you know, going through the writer's, writing process, yourself if you haven't been through it as a writer was really I think what sold me on it. I was very nervous at first, cause, you know, you're kinda learning as you're going through the, um, structures. How I started off, too, was following someone else's structure (laughs), you know, so that was my, I think, second or third year of teaching is when I started. And then each year I would tweak it a little bit for, depending on the kids, or depending on the

needs of the curriculum for that year. Once you feel comfortable with the different components, then bringing in your own personality.

SULZBERGER: Did the kids get to read your writing?

EMERSON: Yes, they do. Which is really kind of nerve-, you know, it's, my very first time it was very nerve-wracking. Now I'm more comfortable, actually, I'm more comfortable (laughs) with students seeing my writing than I am with teachers seeing my writing. But they do, and so they get to see you, too, as a person a little bit more than they would, maybe, you know, if you handed them a worksheet and asked them, you know, what was the verbs and, you know, what are the nouns, you know, showing them this is how I would do my rough draft, and these are my spelling mistakes (laughs), and this is, you know, I'm scratching out in front of them, that was, I think, really important for them to see that that's what writer's do, they don't just write it once and hand it in and get it published, that it is a work-in-progress.

SULZBERGER: Sounds like you used it every year (mmmhm). What were some of the celebrations, or some of the things that you saw as far as growth in your students? Are there any particular stories or situations that stand out, where you kinda really knew that Writer's Workshop was the way to engage kids with the writing process?

EMERSON: I think just the kids enjoying the writing, you know, the writing process. I had, you know, several kids and, um, who just didn't—who didn't like writing, and wouldn't write, and I think the biggest, um, celebrations would be... kids wanting to write more, so they would finish up, say, the photograph writing, and then they would say, 'Can I bring in another photograph?', and do another one, or they'd do one at home and bring it in. Or they would bring, you know, we always had actually an official celebration where the parents came in, and so that was nice to see the parents were just like, 'They like to write now, like they come home, and they feel like they're writers'. And so that was really, I mean, really across the board, so kinda in the beginning you see the kids not wanting to take the risks, and just, you know, saying, well, they would go, like I'd have my brainstorming and they'd say, 'oh, well, you know, she likes to write about her trips to the beach, so I'm gonna write about my trip to the beach'. So it was nice to see them start developing their own personalities and bringing it out in the writing.

SULZBERGER: How many times a week does Writer's Workshop happen? Is it an every day, or is it just part of the block, or whatever your period was for language arts? How did it kinda play out during the week?

EMERSON: It was, it was every day (every day)... There may be different components of it, though, I might do a mini-lesson during my language arts block, and then... give them a chance to apply it. But then the next day, we have a math test or something, so we won't have as much time so it'd be morning work, that they could work on their independent writing and pull out their journals, so they were writing every single day. The mini-lessons were probably two to three times a week, you know, and that was more of your kind of structured, typical lesson, um,

but the kids were writing every day, something from their, you know, their journals or editing or publishing something.

SULZBERGER: How many projects would they go through in a year or a month? I mean, it sounds like there'd be a lot (a lot) of projects.

EMERSON: There is, but not so much of like the published thing, which I think is, some people are really kind of surprised that even though they're writing all the time, we talk about that not everything has to be published. So they may only publish, you know, in a year, maybe eight to ten things, because when we talk about published, that's when it's, you know, it's perfect, you know, it's visually pleasing, it, you know, it makes sense, it's, you know, your perfect... piece. But they'll, they would have their portfolio of tons and tons of writing, that they could go back and keep them from, you know, from year to year and say, 'oh, well I, you know, I wanna work more on this piece, so I'm gonna work on publishing this piece'. So people are usually really surprised when they hear that, because they think, and I think I thought that, too, well, if you write something you go all the way through and you have to, but that you don't always have to publish it, and that's good.

SULZBERGER: I know it's real important for kids to do pre-writing (mmmhm) and organize their thoughts. What were some things that you really liked to do in the classroom that you found your students responded well to, to get the creative juices flowing?

EMERSON: I think just doing a lot, we did, like a heart map, which is basically, it's a big piece of paper with a heart on it, and the kids would just kinda brainstorm things that they liked, um, so that's a really, it's a nice way, and again, at the beginning of the year that we share, so the kids get to know each other, too, so it kinda has a dual purpose also. Another thing I like to do which is kind of interesting, it's, uh, I think they called it 'sightings', and basically just looking around the room, and I would model this one cause it's a little different, so if you were to look at, you know, a lot of classrooms have like, an American flag in it, so I would say, okay, 'flag', and I would write down 'flag. Well, the flag reminds me of the United States, and so then the United States reminds me of Fourth of July, and then Fourth of July reminds me of a picnic we went to, and then, so you kind of have this, like, just list of ideas, but they're authentic ideas from the students' experiences, but just comes off from looking around something in the classroom, or we would go on, like, field trips around the school, you know, school, and kinda look, and see, 'ohhh, I see this car that kinda reminds me of a trip we went on'. So just, you know, just real simple things, but to kinda help get those ideas moving.

SULZBERGER: So the key, I heard two really important things for teachers to keep in mind. One is you said to really teach students what the process is, because it sounds like it would be a really new experience for them. And then the other thing I heard you say was it's authentic experiences of the student, so it doesn't sound like there are prompts or it's structured, it sounds like every student is writing on things that are important to them. So those are—are two big

takeaways. Are there other, sort of tips that you've learned or things in your experience, that you would say to teachers, 'this will really help make it a smooth process in your classroom', or, 'gosh, here's one thing I did and I wish I hadn't done it' (laughs).

EMERSON: Um, I think modeling in front of the class is... huge. I was in, when I first got started, it was in a co-taught classroom, so we would do it together, like the editing. Because editing is really difficult for kids, especially when they're first learning that, so just a lot of the, you know, modeling it, and having that open dialogue is a huge, I think, part of it for the kids to see, you know, the teacher as a writer, and then they could start to transfer it to themselves, seeing themselves as a writer. I mean, I think the, really, the modeling is a big component of it, and, you know, sitting down and giving yourself time to write also, which is—is difficult, you know, when they all wanna conference with you or show you their, what they're working on, but letting them know that you're, you know, a writer, too, and so making sure you take that time, even if it's ten, fifteen minutes to scribble something.

SULZBERGER: Is there a set time sort of near the end for conferencing, or... cause it sounds like you kinda do the mini-lesson, the kids are writing, you're writing (mmmhm), and then is there conferencing that goes on?

EMERSON: Yes, and it comes, actually, goes along the same time as, as they're writing. Different teachers do it a different way, but they'll have the board up, and so when you feel like you're ready for a conference, as a writer, you would sign up and so, that's when that would kind of interrupt my writing, and then I would conference with the student, and—

SULZBERGER: So the student takes the initiative (yes) and says they're ready (yeah) to conference.

EMERSON: And it's nice having a board, cause you will see some kids who (laughs) don't, so I will request if I need to, and I keep a list, so I know who I've conferenced with, and what part of the stage, you know, what stage they are in their writing, so if I see that someone's, you know, they've been in brainstorming for awhile, maybe I need to request a conference with them.

SULZBERGER: And how long does a typical conference take with a student?

EMERSON: Real quick, it's really guided by what they need. What do they enjoy about their paper, and then something they have a question with, and then if you start seeing a pattern, then that's a mini-lesson.

SULZBERGER: I heard you say that when you first started out, you were using Writer's Workshop in a co-taught class (mmmhm), which leads me to believe you had either a pretty heterogeneous group (mmmhm) or, you know, kids that may not have been used to writing a lot of... *content*. What were some of the advantages you found to using Writer's Workshop in a

class where there were students with disabilities? What intrigued you about it, what worked well for the kids?

EMERSON: I think just being able to be at their own pace, I mean, was just really, you know, they never felt like there was... a deadline, because, you know, though we had established expectations on how they were to work, but not everybody was going to publish on the same day, so it was okay that either the writing took them longer, or they might have decided, because it was their own personal choice, that it was gonna be short, and then they would continue to work on possibly another shorter assignment, so I think that really took off, like, 'oh, everybody else is done, I need to be done, you know, I need to be done now, too', and that was okay, so it made it okay that not everybody published at the same time or had the same product.

SULZBERGER: What genre of writing was going on at any particular time? Is there a structure to that, or is it wide-open for (um) the students?

EMERSON: That is kind of wide-open, they had times where it would be, they could take something and just, and do, you know, if they wanted to a poem, but then we had our—our standards, so if I had to do poetry then, you know, we would do poetry and have everyone do some kind of po--, you know, some kind of poem. But we tried to do like the persua--, you know, we did persuasive and stuff, but it was open-ended what you wanted to have your persuasive essay be about.

SULZBERGER: So, if I'm a teacher and I'm sitting out there saying, 'okay, this sounds intriguing, I'd really like to pursue it', are there any particularly good go-to resources that you like, do you just search 'writer's workshop' on the internet and you get some structures, or how-- (that's) how would you start?

EMERSON: That's typically how I've done it, which is, there's, different, like, six plus one, there's writingfix.com, which is a really good, um, resource for mini-lessons, so, um, I think just following any really writing process, and then incorporating it into the writing workshop.

SULZBERGER: And then, so the workshop sounds more like a framework or a structure (structure), and then you build in your standards of learning, your objectives...

EMERSON: Yeah, that's a good way, I've never really thought, but yeah, it is, it's kind of more of the structure, and then you can feed, you know, what you need, as far as curriculum to get out what the, what the students need into it, so it is, and I think that's a little intimidating for teachers at first, because there is a little bit more... flexibility, I think, than what we're used to.

SULZBERGER: Well, and it sounds like a real partnership with the students, too, because the students have so much ownership over what they're writing and, um, how they're going through the process (right). They probably feel very professional going through it.

EMERSON: Yes, they do.

SULZBERGER: Well, any other words of wisdom you want to share with teachers?

EMERSON: No, I mean, I just think, you know, try it, I mean, and I think people are intimidated by the time factor, and I mean, ideally, you would want an hour or so, but you can, I mean, depending on the structure of your day, you can do a twenty-minute mini-lesson, give them twenty minutes to write later on in the day, or the next day, so I would say just jump in and try it, and if you have a colleague who's doing it with you, that, I think, is really important to, so you can kind of bounce ideas off each other.

SULZBERGER: Oh, well, thank you so much for sharing with us, and, um, we look forward to hearing some more from you with great publications.

EMERSON: Great, great, thank you.

[MUSIC: T/TAC William and Mary Podcast Outro]