

**Teacher Research:  
A "Copy the Model" Classroom Inquiry Study for Teaching Writing**

by Lisa Frase

*"Read, read, read everything...and see how they do it. Just like a carpenter who works as an apprentice and studies the master...read!" William Faulkner*

Modeling writing is not a new idea. Writers find their personal models inside the pages of a book. They read, analyze, evaluate, and try out the various techniques of their favorite authors. Writers read differently than other readers. They focus not only on the story itself, but on the flow of the language and how the words are strung together. Through this in-depth reading, writers learn how to write. It's a reasonable conclusion that children should learn to write through reading.

The difference between adult writers and child writers is the process. Children need to understand the process and what goes through the writer's mind as they compose something from nothing. The teacher acts as a liaison between the young writer and the published author. Writing aloud allows the teacher to make her thinking as a writer visible. Students watch as the teacher demonstrates her thinking about the process, skills and techniques of writing (Conversations, pg. 33).

When a teacher writes out loud, they are using metacognition. Metacognition means thinking about your thinking. The teacher is thinking about their writing by talking about it out loud. The student hears how the teacher thinks and applies this type of thinking to their own cognitive processes. They become aware of their thinking as they write, and therefore, control their writing processes(Pierce, 2003).

The question when considering this metacognitive modeling becomes, "How do students move from observation to active engagement in the writing process in order for learning to transfer?" It is one thing to observe; it is quite another to apply. The inquiry project begins with this question in mind. The concept is to add a level of engagement during the modeling process.

The project goal requires that second graders learn how to write a paragraph. The procedure is through metacognitive modeling. The additional step that requires engagement is to require students to write as the teacher models and writes. At the end of the writing session, the student reads the text with a partner. The purpose is to actively engage students in the evaluation of the modeled text by asking them to

observe the model, copy the model, and read the model. During this process, the inquiry project hypothesizes that the student is learning the structure of a paragraph, sentence construction, how the sentences support the main idea, how words are effectively put together, the logical order of the paragraph, and basic conventions. The process is repeated ten times. Each day the teacher and students engage in writing a paragraph. During the process, the teacher slowly moves from metacognitive modeling to shared writing where the students become active participants in determining what is to be written. Together, collectively, the teacher and the students write. The teacher and the students produce the same piece of writing, sharing their thinking and processes along the way. By the end of the ten sessions, the inquiry project assumes students will demonstrate growth in a post assessment.

Constance Weaver in Grammar in Context suggests that teachers model writing in two ways (Grammar in Context, pg. 88): A teacher can place their own writing on the overhead projector and model the revision and editing process, or the teacher can seek permission from a student and place a student's piece of writing on the overhead in order to work through this process metacognitively. Using writing by the teacher or student demonstrates to the students how a writer thinks when they revise or edit. The hypothesis of this project takes this thinking to another level. The teacher and students write the same piece together. As the teacher models revision and editing, the students also make changes and corrections. Students who simply observe are passive learners. Students who engage in the process become active learners, better understanding how the process works through actual engagement.

An example of copying the model can be seen when observing a dance class. The instructor models the technique for the students. The student observes and attempts the technique at the same time. This process occurs over and over again until the student achieves mastery. The teacher continues to model while observing the students copy the model in a mirror. The teacher can stop and guide the student through corrections before practicing together again. The students are not merely observers, but are active learners engaged in the process. All of the students are watching the instructor while practicing the same technique. Later the technique is applied to a choreographed dance. It takes sufficient practice in order to master and apply the technique. The same can be said for modeling and mastering the techniques of writing.

Jane Hanson makes a striking statement in her book, When Writers Read, "Writers, readers, and evaluators write, read, and evaluate as ways to learn about something," (When Writers Read, pg.94). Hanson considers this a guiding principal for learning across the curriculum. The power of this statement applies to this project when considering that when students copy the model, they are writing, reading and evaluating in order to learn.

Wilhelm discuss using metacognitive think aloud strategies to help students "learn about themselves and their own thinking and reading" (Improving Comprehension with Think-Aloud Strategies, pg. 34). He goes on further to state, "This reflection helps students to learn and use strategies on a self-conscious level." Wilhelm discusses this process as a reader; however, the same process can easily be applied to the writer. The writer learns through reading and applying strategies gleaned from the author's work. This application is necessary to the growth of the writer. It only makes sense to conclude that the teacher as a model can assist the students in application when the students copy the model in order to learn the process. The act of copying the model makes the process active and moves the student from passive learner to working on a self-conscious level. An excellent example of a writer learning to write by copying a model of writing is Ben Franklin. He taught himself to write through this very process. He would study the styles of essays through the process of copying (Spark Notes Online, Benjamin Franklin).

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards certifies that accomplished teachers in Early and Middle Childhood / Literacy: Reading and Language Arts "interact effectively with students while extending to them increasing responsibility for their own learning." In consideration of this standard, it is a reasonable inference that teachers who effectively model while expecting students to interact with the model through copying and reading, allows for a natural release to responsibility. This short-term copy the model process allows students time to evaluate the foundational structure of the writing before attempting to write on their own. A pre-assessment of writing allows the instructor to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the individual students, and guide their modeling to ensure that they meet the student's needs.

In this inquiry project, the teacher pre-assessed the students by asking them to write a paragraph on any topic that they knew well.

The examination of the pre-assessment revealed a variety of abilities. All of the students were able to write on their topic exclusively with little or no extraneous

information. Some of the students did not understand how to structure a paragraph. Some students wrote sentences line by line, while others wrote one run-on sentence for their entire paragraphs. There were students who began each of their sentences the same way. Other students had trouble capitalizing the beginnings of sentences and ending their sentences with punctuation. A number of students had a misplaced order to their paragraphs. They lacked a logical flow. Students lacked depth and complexity in their writing. Some students wrote more while others wrote less. A direct relationship with the child's reading ability and writing ability was noted. Students who read at a higher level tended to write longer, more organized paragraphs. The lower readers had difficulty expressing their thinking and had more conventional errors. The lower readers also had more trouble writing complete thoughts. As second graders, all of the students are at the developmental stages of writing.

During the inquiry project, the teacher modeled writing a paragraph each day. During the modeling, the teacher was careful to model her thinking using metacognitive processes. As the teacher wrote, the students wrote the exact words on their own papers. After the paragraphs were completed, the students read the paragraphs aloud to each other and discussed the writing. This process continued for ten days. Halfway during the process the teacher began to release the modeling to a shared writing experience. Routman says, "Many teachers find that when they do more and better modeling-writing for and *with their students*-everything improves: kids' engagement, abundance of ideas for writing, willingness to write and take risks, knowledge of how and what to write, and the quality and quantity of their writing," (Writing Essentials, pg. 180).

Weaver defines modeled writing when the "teacher writes in front of the students, creating the text, doing the writing and thinking aloud about writing strategies and skills," (Teaching Writing: Balancing Process and Product, pg. 27). This project attempts to bridge the gap between modeled writing and shared writing. The difference occurs when the student writes as the teacher writes. The entire class writes the same piece. The process moves to shared writing when the teacher and the student create the text together (Teaching Writing: Balancing Process and Product, pg. 27). In shared writing the teacher controls the pen, however, in a copy the model process, the student copies what the teacher writes. In shared writing, the teacher and the students share the decision making.

During the shared writing experience in the classroom, a particular thing occurred. The teacher wrote two sentences that could easily be combined. The teacher modeled combining the sentences only to discover that she repeated words. The revision was taken further. A student raised their hand and stated, "That makes the writing much better." The idea of noticing and evaluating the difference between good and poor writing began to take hold. Katie Wood Ray states, "If the writer knows what to look for, he or she can learn a lot from looking closely at another craftperson's work, and the text, of course, is the writer's work "gallery"".

The post-assessment asked students to write a paragraph on a topic they knew. An examination of the pre and post paragraphs revealed subtle, yet startling results. Kevion did not understand the structure of a paragraph in the pre-assessment. His words were chopped into half sentences and laid out vicariously on the paper. In the post-paragraph, Kevin indented and formatted his paragraph appropriately. Sean wrote one run-on sentence in his pre-paragraph. In the post-paragraph, he attempted to write several sentences, capitalizing the beginnings and punctuating the endings. Michael's pre-paragraph began every sentence with "I like." His post-paragraph showed a variety of sentence beginnings. Sondra wrote on the same topic in both paragraphs, but her word choice became specific and used more interesting language in the post-paragraph. Mary's first paragraph was more complex than the other students; however, she had several long run-on sentences. Most of her sentences in the second paragraph were complete.

Brandi's first paragraph lacked focus. She had unnecessary sentences that could have easily been left out. Her post-assessment paragraph stayed focused and was better organized. Sarah wrote more details in her second paragraph, and Shelby varied her sentence beginnings. Janet's second paragraph had specific details, better organization and stronger word choice.

Overall, the students showed improvement in their writing. A foundation was built for the teacher to expand upon. The children demonstrated growth and new understanding of the writing process. They were able to take what they learned through the copy the model process and apply it to their own writing. The results were subtle, yet noticeable enough to earn attention.

In conclusion, the inquiry project showed that the students experienced growth and improvement through a "copy the model" process. As writing instruction stretches to include specific writing techniques, story structure, and other strategies, the students can continue to copy the model as examples for their own writing. Once

released to write on their own, they have the knowledge to write because they have practiced using the teacher's model. This may lead students to "notice" the writing of published authors and understand how the writer processes their thinking while putting the words down on paper. This analysis of text can help the young writer develop the techniques and strategies that real writers use. As they develop and "try out" the different techniques, students become increasingly aware of what makes writing work. The teacher acts as a model and facilitator of this awareness. The additional step of copying the model actively engages the writer in the process of reading, writing and evaluating.

*\*Student's names have been changed.*

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