

C.O.U.N.T. on Implementing Writing Instruction Beyond the Traditional Limits

Abstract

Due to negative classroom experiences, lack of resources and access, the fear of the unknown, and at times a disconnect, students are often fearful of literacy learning (reading, writing)—and in some cases outright bored. This piece highlights a variation of Childs' "C.O.U.N.T." acronym, which addresses ways in which teachers can infuse popular culture, technology, and authentic experiences into their traditional writing and literacy curriculums. From creating and cultivating a culture that embraces literacy in various modes, and providing assignments that move beyond traditional assessment, this article will demonstrate the powerful reach that teachers can have by honing in on creative ways to facilitate writing instruction. Going beyond the use of pencil and paper writing and assessment in classrooms, and simple but meaningful and authentic ways to enhance literacy instruction for teachers will be discussed.

Keywords: *Literacy, Literacy Engagement, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, Relevance, Technology*

Teachers are asked to do so much—before the pandemic, through the pandemic, and after the great virtual teaching shift – that being asked to do one more thing seems like too much. When lesson planning, developing curriculum, and teaching, many have been posed with the issue of whether to go back to the way things were done before 2020 or take the gems that came out of online learning and use them to their advantage in face-to-face settings. Teachers are doing what they can to stay above water and work to close gaps that occurred during the virtual teaching shift, as many suffer from technostress—being connected to devices constantly and overloaded with new technological information (Tarafdar et al., 2010; Gabbiadini et. al, 2023). Although the shift back from virtual teaching has been difficult, the experience opened the door for educators to be more creative in the process of teaching, as well as how assignments and assessments are completed in their classroom settings. Teachers in their learning communities have gone above and beyond without preparation or warning.

The Buy In: Going Beyond Pencil and Paper Assignments

When it comes to literacy learning, the focus in the primary grades is often on the mechanics of reading – decoding, comprehension skills, and building vocabulary – however, this is where students often stay and remain stagnant in their literacy journey (Childs, 2018). Writing instruction with students in the early grades is a similar process. Students learn to write, but don't write to learn. Students must understand that the writing and literacy skills taught in literacy classrooms are useful in many other environments. Eliminating the disconnect and shame that students can feel learning such a challenging and foundational subject can be difficult, but to build better engagement and confidence requires relevance and a weaving of student interests into the curriculum.

Going beyond the use of paper and pencil assignments is challenging. In recent years, with evolving technology, students have been invited to use technology to pre-write, compose, and formulate their ideas in a variety of ways. From having students create their own books and compilations, to writing online reviews of toys, music, sports, food, and popular products, to having them write plays, and even writing persuasive pieces to create change within their schools and communities—these tasks are far beyond the traditional writing prompts in classrooms of the past. “Although students often understand and use concepts they were taught, it is the selection of the language and the way teachers approach instruction that often causes a disconnect” (Childs, 2018, pg.72). To bridge this gap, teachers must invest the time into getting to truly know their students, and learning their curriculum enough so that they can be comfortable in making modifications to cultivate creativity and engagement. Abdalla Elhussien Mohammed (2019) states that the “...Creative writing goal is not just assisting and enabling learning; it can also provide alternative ways of expressing...” (Abdalla Elhussien Mohammed, 2019; Everett, 2005). Students need alternative ways to express themselves.

In educational settings, too often the curriculum leaves writing assignments up to the ELA/Literacy teacher, rather than integrating writing assignments across disciplines. Traditional writing assignments and exercises are also becoming more of an afterthought, and writing instruction is not much of a “hot topic” in professional development settings. Students need to be taught the value of writing, through authentic and relevant experiences, and the various manners in which their writing can be used. Educators need to be able to reimagine how they use writing within their classrooms. There are innovative possibilities in which writing instruction can reinvigorate students’ literacy journeys and create spaces that break the normal limits that traditional literacy classrooms have been defined by. Writing is not only a tool to assess student

knowledge of concepts, but they need to see it as a tool to share their voice--their ideas, opinions, culture, feelings, and thought processes can be captured with a prompt that is crafted with them in mind, as well as free from the constraints of traditional writing assessment and planning.

Writing is not only a tool for academic use, but its power spans far beyond the paper or computer it is composed on. Students need spaces that affirm and challenge them and for educators to use writing for more than an assignment, but as a vehicle to communicate in non-traditional ways and inspire.

Making the Investment: C.O.U.N.T. on Fostering Engaging Writing Practices

As an educator, it takes time to develop lessons and provide a curriculum that invites students to think outside of the box, while staying within the realm of what is required by school district standards. Writing is foundational and can be used as assessment, as warmups, as reflection, and creatively— but is often put on the backburner in the K-12 classroom setting. This may be the result of high stakes and standardized testing preparation taking priority. When thinking of elevating, innovating, and reimagining literacy and writing instruction, educators must be strategic in how they plan instruction. Using writing in new and creative manners is a way to cover a lot of ground. Jones (2015) states, “An authentic writing pedagogy supports children’s evolving identities” (p. 76). Incorporating writing across the curriculum and challenging “old” or “traditional” ways of literacy learning allows students and teachers to engage in rich and authentic conversations about writing standards in a manner that is relevant, allows for choice, more open-ended questioning, and higher-order thinking, while also allowing teachers and students to see their development in thought and abilities over time. Educators need to tap into the things that interest and engage the students in which they serve. Students already use literacy and writing skills while engaging in social media, popular culture news, texting, and

other technology use, , they just fail to make the connection to the topics they cover in class with their teachers. Using a variation of Childs (2022) C.O.U.N.T acronym (below), allows for teachers to grow in their teaching practices, by making the creative effort to connect learning from inside and outside of the classroom:

Culturally responsive writing. To reach students, teachers must understand that each student that comes into their classroom brings their own culture. As a result, each student's needs and responses may be different. Authentic and culturally responsive writing experiences can be utilized to create a responsive classroom culture. Writing and literacy learning is so often way too structured and methodological, which may turn off the interest of students who fear that their work is not perfect enough. Students respond to writing and literature that they can relate to. For example, vernacular, dialects, slang, acronyms, and accents *are* engaging language—however, they are often dismissed and frowned upon in traditional classroom settings. Teachers should fuse into lessons and writing prompts language and ideas that tie in students' culture with academic culture. Social media terms (e.g., hashtags, trending, influencer, captions) and popular culture –music, sports, fashion, movies – are just a few examples of relevant content that could make a connecting impact in the classroom.

Opportunities to Write Beyond Assessment

Give students the opportunity to write beyond assessment purposes. Students should know that writing is valuable even when it is not produced for formal assessment. Opportunities for authenticity and relevance combined result in engaged students. An example of a cross-curricular, open-ended writing prompt would be “How has (insert topic/subject) helped you today”? Additionally, opportunities for students to respond to others' writing also encourage

high engagement. Exposing students to various types of writing and genres, having them critique and make style and content recommendations to inspire their curiosity.

Unpack Problems and Issues to Demonstrate the Power of Writing

Writing should spark creativity and deepen meaning beyond—English Language Arts Reading (ELAR) lessons. Students should see themselves as authors because when they write, they are authors. Writing is not just a paper and pencil task, but it always has a purpose in process and product. Giving students varying scenarios to write responses to helps to develop their style and, most importantly, their voice. Students can write about real-world problems and possible solutions—problems in their schools and communities, personal choices such as tough tasks they have encountered at home or in the world, and even scientific and mathematical problems. Writers take a stance and students should be given the chance to take a stance frequently. Experiencing the power of their voice and their writing will refine their ability to identify other writers' style and writing abilities. Writing reaches a wide array of audiences and students need to know the power of their words and its imprint that it can make.

Narrative Writing is Relevant Writing

Narrative writing can be personal; when writing tasks are made personal, they usually feel more relevant. Narrative writing can be used across disciplines, and it can capture the past and the present. Writing in a narrative style shares various points-of-views (ex. first-person, third-person) and perspectives. The following are examples of narrative writing prompts:

- I can relate to this because...
- My point of view on this is...
- This character's experience is like/unlike mine because...

Narrative writing allows students to learn and explore using language structures, sequence, and to further develop their own writing style. It allows students to be free from the traditional realm of writing assessment, in being more creative and telling a fictional or non-fictional story .

Technology is Key

Technology is ever changing and using it within instruction requires teachers to stay current with the latest apps, tools, and strategies. This can be challenging and outright intimidating at times, but the benefits outweigh the stresses of staying updated. Creating writing assignments that use technology and transcend beyond paper allow students to explore different literacies better and simultaneously, and provide an opportunity to delve into the multiple literacies – listening, speaking, reading, writing, and visual. Technology also provides multiple modes of communication: text types/genres, videos, music, photographs, charts, and speeches, etc.. With exposure to digital and multimodal learning, students can become more versatile in their literacy journey. Some examples of using technology to enhance writing instruction include:

- Using blogging (individually student created and collective blogs)
- Creating podcasts and writing scripts (and podcast questions)
- Constructing creative writing prompts with the assistance of AI (artificial intelligence) programs like ChatGPT
- Using AI to be a co-author, a guide, a reviewer, or a way to narrow writing focuses and ideas

Finding Value: Cultivating a Classroom Culture of Writing When Writing is Not the Trend

Writing should not be assigned solely just to take a grade, but should be discussed frequently with students. Discuss various styles and genres, discuss authorship and their possibilities as authors for a variety of purposes in their lives. Writing is a skill needed for communication throughout life. Providing students with quality writing instruction involves working as a team as educators and within homes, and is not a role that is limited to English or reading class. Writing influences and educates beyond the classroom. Writers take a stance. Students must be equipped in multimodal ways to take on their social and academic journeys through writing. How many current movies are around that do not have a written and well developed script? How about songs without lyrics? Can we send text messages without written language or symbols? Can a coach draw up a play without symbols and strategy? Can we file a complaint if we are victims of injustice or simply treated unfairly at a local business without writing? Writing is not trendy, but it will never go out of style; it will equip our students for careers and life if we center our instruction on authenticity and relevance.

About the Author

Dr. Kamshia Childs is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Texas A&M University-Commerce where she teaches curriculum and literacy courses and works with pre-service educators. Dr. Childs has been a literacy educator for over 20 years and has worked in both urban and rural settings in K-12 and higher education. She has published several literacy and multicultural education articles in peer-reviewed literacy journals, written a self-published book, contributed to books, has an in-press children's book, and presents at various state, national, and international conferences on topics related to literacy, literacy

engagement, digital literacies, educator empowerment, parent involvement, and culturally relevant pedagogy.

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