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Writing Partnerships

Cathy Hsu

I'm done!" Elijah declared, waving his paper at me. (Student names are pseudonyms.) I inhaled deeply and surveyed the scene. A huddle had formed around me, a wad of writing remained unread in my hand, the girl I had on hold looked forlorn, and the clock was ticking away. I was surrounded. I was outnumbered. And I was exhausted.

Days like this were typical. In the three-part writers' workshop—from minilesson to independent writing time to share—the independent writing time dealt me a daily wild card. I could prepare for the minilesson. As long as the class was gathered together, I had a captive audience. It was that window of time in the middle that had me stretched.

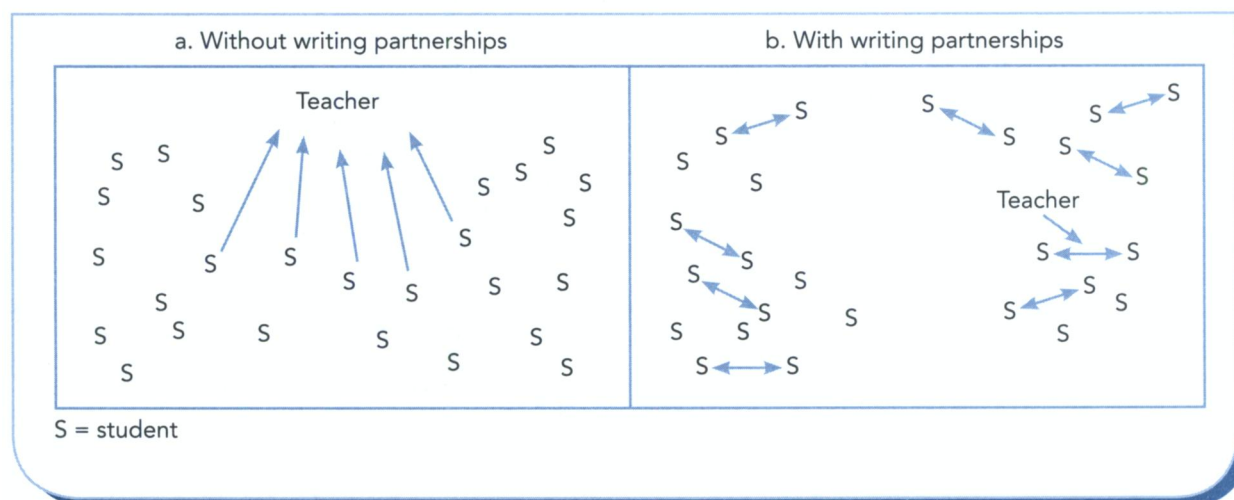
Spurred on by a visiting literacy consultant, I introduced writing partnerships into my writers' workshop. The kids took to the idea swiftly. We carried on. Then, one day I stopped and looked around. Students were turning to their partners, initiating lively conversations. They were thinking hard and were reexamining drafts. Shy writers were speaking up. The room buzzed with fruitful talk. I circulated, observed, and

joined in when necessary. A simple change yielded a big difference.

What is distinct about writing partnerships is that they effect two key changes in the writers' workshop. First, the independent writing segment stabilizes as the students are reoriented, no longer flocking to the teacher as the sole source of support but significantly supporting one another (Figure 1). Second, writing partnerships foster frequent student-to-student conferencing, substantially increasing students' practice with critiquing writing and with recommending actions. In a nutshell, it is flow and feedback. Traffic is redirected, and students' experience responding to text multiplies.

As I describe my two years of experience using partnerships in the writers' workshop, I view them in contrast to the three years I taught the writers' workshop without them. I supplement my fifth-grade experience with that of three colleagues I surveyed, observed, and videotaped in their kindergarten, first-, and third-grade classrooms. We use partnerships in our writers' workshops at an international school where class sizes are in the low 20s with a range of

Figure 1
Diagram of Independent Writing Segment



nationalities and where roughly a third of students are English-language learners (ELLs).

Partnerships in Perspective

Partnering in the writers' workshop, a concept from educator Lucy Calkins, is explained in two minilessons designed for primary-grade teachers (Calkins & Bleichman, 2003; Calkins & Oxenhorn, 2003). Those two minilessons are embedded in larger writing units and thus their follow-up is not detailed, but I've found it worthwhile to dedicate a few days to implementing writing partnerships (Table 1). Mermelstein (2007)

described partner shares as an effective alternative to whole-class, end-of-workshop shares. Several articles described writing partnerships among university students (Soares, 1998; Warner, 1995) and middle schoolers paired with college students (Gillis, 1994; Kutno, 1993).

Neuman and Roskos (1997) described five features of authentic literacy in practice that I see the partnerships offer: the presence of other people, feedback from others, access to tools, multiple options for activity, and problem-solving situations. I witnessed the gradual release of responsibility (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983) as the job of conferring

Table 1
Sample One-Week Implementation

Day	Question	Purpose	Description
1	How can a writing partner make you a better writer?	Establish that writing partners are a powerful, long-term resource.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Role play or show video of a writing partnership in action. ■ Allow students to describe what they notice and list reasons for partnerships.
2	What are the dos and don'ts of writing partnerships?	Involve students in articulating norms and agreements for partnership work.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Create a T-chart with "Do" on one side and "Don't" on the other. ■ Students write positive and negative behaviors on sticky notes, and sort them into the "Do" or "Don't" columns. ■ Help the class organize, evaluate, and discuss their ideas. ■ Write agreed-upon norms in marker.
3	How do we "touch base" with our partners?	Train students to be accountable to partners by checking in at the start and end of independent writing time.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Illustrate analogy of baseball players touching base and continuing on toward goal. ■ Introduce students to their writing partners. ■ Start by having partners touch base to share their goals for the independent writing time. ■ Close by having partners touch base about what they accomplished.
4	When should we confer with our partners?	Promote student-initiated partner conferences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Choose one student's writing to highlight when partners should confer during independent writing time, not just touch base. ■ Ask students to brainstorm situations needing a partnership conference: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Wanting feedback on a draft b. Encountering difficulty while revising c. Needing help with editing
5	How can we give good feedback?	Teach effective response skills using an age-appropriate strategy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Draw a sandwich and introduce the term <i>compliment sandwich</i>. ■ Demonstrate giving a suggestion directly versus couching it between two compliments. ■ Invite partners to practice exchanging compliment sandwiches.

became shared with students. Vygotsky (1934/1986) upheld that “what the child can do in cooperation today, he can do alone tomorrow” (p. 188). Certainly my writers were doing much more when paired together. There was an upsurge of effective critiquing, decision making, and revising. Writing partnerships were a stepping stone to independence.

Matching Writers

In pairing students, my first aim is avoiding social combinations. I’ve found mixed-gender partnerships work very well for this and have watched successful boy–girl pairs in other classrooms. Next, I do a rough grouping of my writers according to ability, aiming for pairs with similar ability. I fine-tune my match-making, considering strengths, weaknesses, organizational habits, personality, ELL needs, and potential interference from pull-out support. First-grade teacher Amanda shares,

I like to make my writing partnerships based more on pairs that have different strengths. For example, Christine still struggles to put her thoughts into words that can easily be read by others, but she has tremendous voice and sense of story. So I pair her with someone like Jasmine who is stronger in spelling but needs a good verbal model.

And what if there is an odd number of students? What about trios? I’ve arranged the students in groups of three when the numbers required it but avoid it whenever possible. There is less to negotiate when only two students are involved, each having one clear point person and receiving more immediate feedback.

Because partnerships are long term, managing expectations is key. When students understand that writing partnerships do not equal friendships, last yearlong, and may even pair members of the opposite sex, all runs smoother. I make adjustments if students arrive or leave midyear, but otherwise I preserve all partnerships—even ones that seem lacking in chemistry. Instead of reconfiguring challenged pairs, I either coach them personally or address endemic issues in whole-class minilessons. Class seating is designed so partners always sit together during independent writing time, though they always have access to other writers at their tables.

Setting the Tone and Tools in Place

Before unveiling our partner lists, my colleagues and I first establish a common vision (Table 1). To generate excitement among her kindergartners, Susan explains,

I do the whole build up with “Something is coming....” When they find out it’s a tool and it’s a person, they are thrilled. Feedback this year during a parent conference went like this: Cameron likes the writers’ workshop now that he has a writing partner.

Amanda starts her first graders off in temporary partnerships within the first two weeks of school. By the time they find out their long-term partners, they approach the opportunity with more positive attitudes.

Tools supporting effective response are critical. Physical posters and memorable strategies equip kids for the most difficult, yet most valuable, element of partnering: good feedback. I feature “compliment sandwiches” in Table 1, but they can easily be replaced by other response strategies. Kathryn trains her third graders using the acronym TAG: *T*—Tell what you liked, *A*—Ask a question, *G*—Give a suggestion. For a class with behavioral challenges, the TAG poster stays on the board, structuring partner conferences all year. Charts can list a menu of partner actions (Table 2), as well as prompts for four areas of feedback: (1) content, (2) craft, (3) process, and (4) progress (Mermelstein, 2007). For pairs to be effectively engaged in the workshop, as depicted in Figure 1b, partnerships need a strong launch.

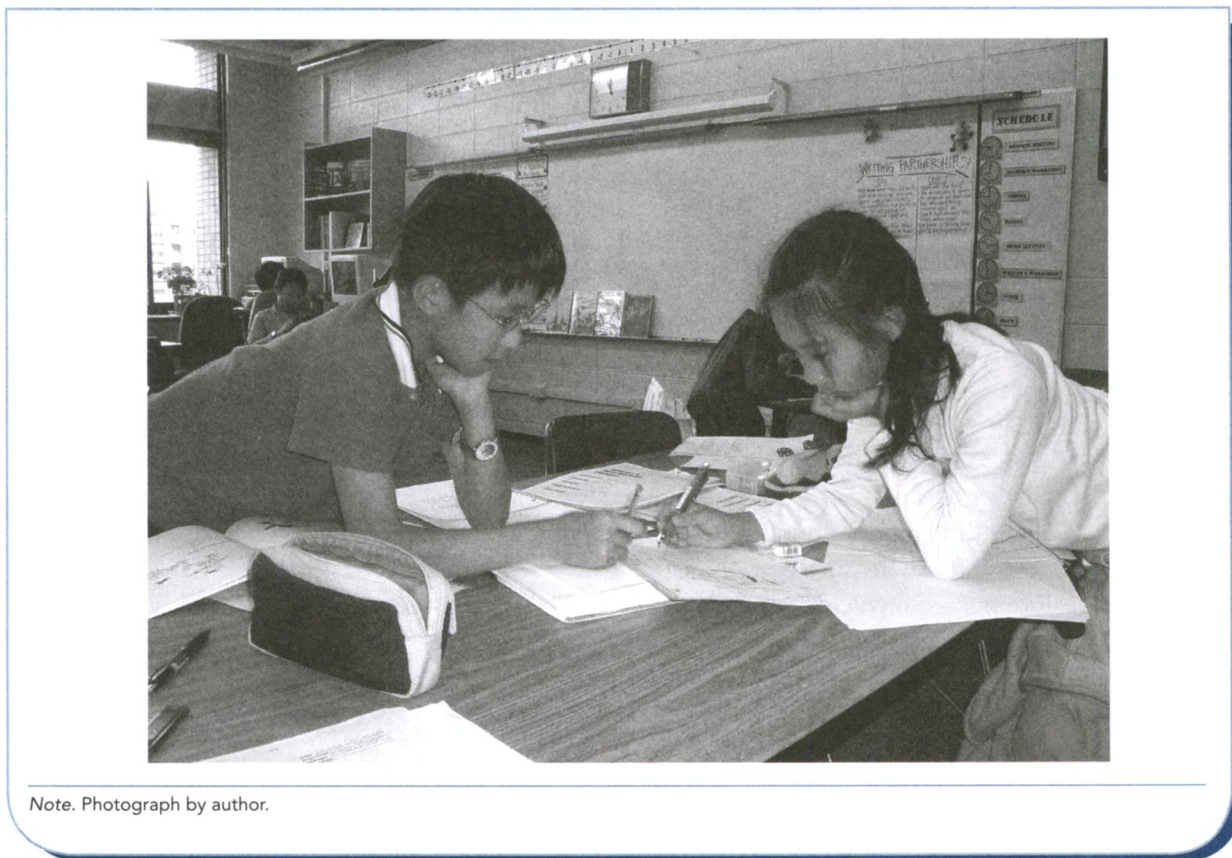
Supporting Yearlong, Productive Partnering

During independent writing time, there’s a blend of teacher-led partner activities and natural, student-led actions. Partnerships create structure, but there is also flexibility and autonomy. Students write in class using writers’ notebooks or folders until they finish a draft or revision, at which point they turn to consult their partners (Figure 2). At times, teachers may ask students to act out their partner’s writing, edit together using a checklist, or assess pieces with rubrics (Figure 3). Teachers and classmates supplement partner feedback, especially at end-of-workshop shares

Table 2
Menu of Actions During Independent Writing

What students can do	What teachers can do
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Compliment partners ■ Think aloud ■ Share drafts ■ Question partners ■ Suggest revisions and resources ■ Peer-edit ■ Evaluate drafts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Circulate to assess ■ Call partners together ■ Participate to push thinking ■ Participate to model feedback ■ Supplement or modify partner feedback ■ Recommend resources ■ Compliment partners

Figure 2
Partners Turn to One Another



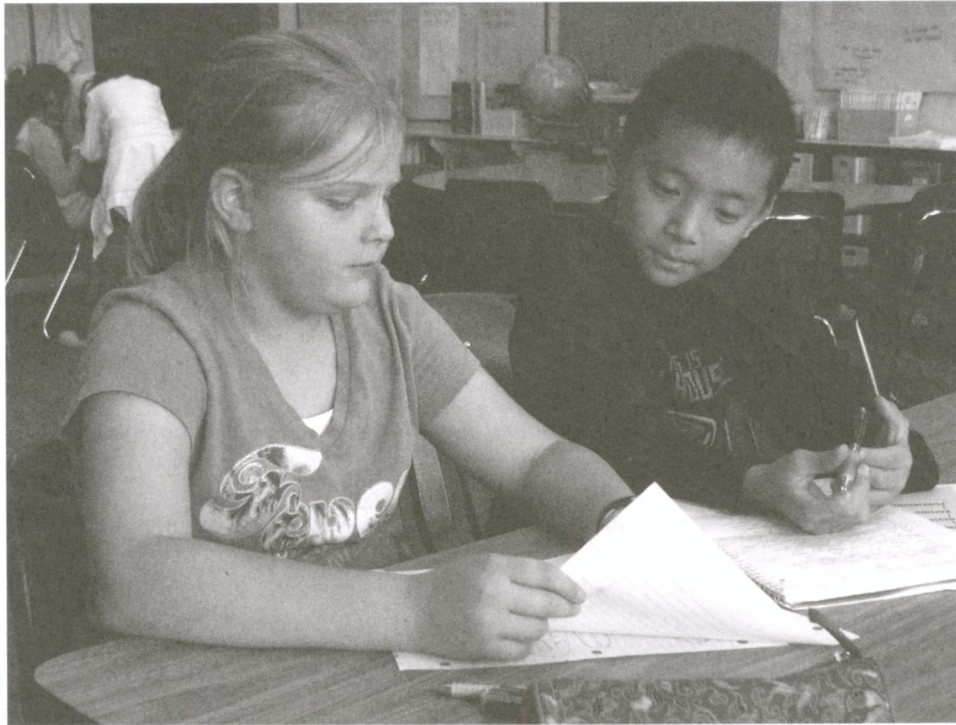
Note. Photograph by author.

when kids reconnect with the whole-class writing community.

Two potential problems may arise during the independent writing time. First, partners may not be engaging one another deeply, which is when teacher involvement is crucial. Teachers can participate

in partner talks without dominating them, such as when Susan skillfully probed, "What can she add to give you a better picture?" and "Out of *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, and *why*, what do you think is missing from this piece?" In the classes I observed, teachers circulated much less for regulating behavior and

Figure 3
Partners Assess Writing Together



Note. Photograph by author.

much more for stimulating partner talk and thinking. Second, if student feedback focuses on minor edits more than substantial revisions, I encourage kids to “do damage to drafts” and try “radical revisions” like revamping the genre, changing the narrator, or switching from past to present tense. A rich resource for more strategies is Heard’s (2002) *The Revision Toolbox: Teaching Techniques That Work*.

Monitoring and celebrating the partnerships is a yearlong charge (Table 3). When a quarter ends or tables are getting too comfortable, whichever comes first, I reconfigure seating, keeping partners together. After a semester in partnerships, I open the door to writing response groups. By then, the kids are seasoned, and their feedback is finer. Momentum increases when students see their writing can be reviewed by an editorial team. Response groups are another arena for partners to reconnect with the larger community, and their feedback skills are stronger, thanks to the partnerships.

Putting the “Workshop” in My Writers’ Workshop

Partnerships linked writers and built bonds. I once found Danielle rifling through books. I beamed when she explained what her partner inspired: “I’m working on my songbook, but I wasn’t sure what type of song to write, happy or sad, so Edward said to look through poem books to get ideas.” Another day, Danielle rushed to me whispering, “May I please go to the computer lab? I *need* to ask my writing partner a question.”

Fantastic feedback was rampant. Trevor responded to Nicole’s book recommendation by saying, “I like your beginning. It makes the reader think! I think you can improve your word choice and use more power verbs. I also think you shouldn’t expose so much information about the book.”

Kai, a budding ELL writer, complimented Paul for writing his adventure in the second person: “I like the

Table 3
Yearlong Scope

Phase	Timeline	Actions
Setup	September	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Launch writers' workshop ■ Observe and assess writers
	October	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Pair students and plan seating arrangements ■ Implement writing partnerships
Support	November–December	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Observe and participate in partner conferences ■ Teach additional minilessons on partnering as needed
	January	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Modify partnerships if class enrollment changes ■ Facilitate midyear student reflection on partnerships
Extension	February	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Introduce writing response groups
	March–April	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Continue supporting writing partnerships ■ Coordinate writing response groups
Culmination	May–June	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Facilitate end-of-year student reflection on partnerships ■ Celebrate the year's writing and partnerships

way you don't have a character. Your characters are the readers." Paul responded by questioning, "Has my story taught you a lesson?"

At intersections around the room, practical ideas were in constant exchange. Before writing partnerships, my writers' workshop still felt oddly traditional as kids streamed toward me to obtain my opinion and directions. The flow of traffic bottlenecked wherever I stood. I got quite a workout responding to the volume of student writing. Writing partnerships reshaped my writers' workshop, making it more like a fitness center where each child was exercising (and in some cases discovering) their own feedback muscles. And rather than being exhausting, independent writing time became exciting.

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