

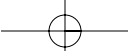
The Independent Reading Workshop

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For years now, I have squeezed into crowded sessions at national conferences to hear authors tell the stories of their lives and their craft. I've loved knowing that while he was writing *Make Way for Ducklings*, Robert McCloskey kept ducks in his Greenwich Village apartment, that E. B. White wrote drafts of *Charlotte's Web* sitting on a bale of hay in a barn watching a spider at work, and that Karla Kuskin found the idea for her picturebook, *The Philharmonic Gets Dressed*, when her daughter was given a doll for her birthday and immediately proceeded to lift up the doll's skirts to check out her underpants. "All of a sudden, I remembered my childhood fixation with underpants. I remembered twirling around on the fence at recess and my classmates chanting, 'I see London, I see France, I see Karla's underpants.' The idea for a picturebook was born."

Stories like these are not just cute author anecdotes, they are revolutionary, because they help us realize that writing isn't simply desk work, it is also life work. Writing is not just a matter of making lists and drafting entries and turning details into drafts, it is also a matter of keeping ducks in a city apartment, of watching a shaft of sunlight turn a bale of hay into gold, of remembering recess games and taunts. When we teach writing, we teach young people to live differently because they write (Calkins with Harwayne, 1991).

How good it would be if we could, at national conferences, squeeze into crowded sessions and hear the stories of great *readers*. Most of us and most of our students do not have great readers who function as mentors in our lives. If we thought of teaching reading as apprenticing ourselves to great readers, the teaching methods we use would change in radical ways.

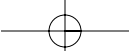


I do not think these great readers would tell us that they write compare-and-contrast essays or answer someone else's questions at the end of each chapter or make collections of figurative language. Instead, these great readers would tell us about bringing their reading to the people and passions and places of their lives. They'd tell about packing two suitcases when they leave on a trip, one for clothes and the other for books. They'd show us book reviews folded into billfolds and describe piles of books on bedside tables and cite the reading friends who keep them company. These reading stories would not just be cute reader anecdotes. They'd be revolutionary. They'd help us see that, because they read, readers live differently. They'd help us see that reading is not just a little thing we do with black marks on the page, it's a big thing we do with our whole lives.

The Structure of the Reading Workshop

In the reading workshop, as in the writing workshop, it is important to maintain a simple, predictable structure because it is the work children do that will be changing and complex. *How* we structure the reading workshop is up to each of us. The important thing is *that* we structure this time, and that we do so in ways our students can anticipate. Those of us coming from a writing workshop background may find it helpful to structure the reading workshop in ways which parallel our writing workshops, so that our children learn to work productively inside the two structures at the same time. Whatever we decide, the structures of a reading workshop must be predictable. If I ask children, "How does your reading workshop generally go in this classroom?" I hope they can answer. If a child says, "First we listen to a chapter of the read-aloud, then afterwards we talk," I know this child will listen to the read-aloud anticipating the conversation she'll soon have. If a child says, "We get free-choice reading time every morning," this means she can turn the lights off at night, saving the final chapter of a novel to complete in school.

Most of us begin the reading workshop with a minilesson followed by reading time (which is when we confer, lead guided reading groups, and do strategy lessons). After reading alone, our children meet with partners and have conversations which are often guided by us. Then we gather the class together for a sharing. Some teachers follow a somewhat different structure but always, our workshops are highly structured and predictable. Readers can be more planful, purposeful, and full of initiative if they work within a predictable, consistent structure.



The Minilesson

The reading workshop, like the writing workshop, usually begins with the class gathering on the carpet for a minilesson in which we teach a strategy readers can use not only in the independent reading workshop but also in their reading lives. Minilessons generally explore one topic for a week or two (reading with expression, thinking about characters, making time for reading in one's life). Although minilessons are primarily a forum for teaching youngsters strategies they can use in their independent reading, they also give us an opportunity to shape the values of our classroom community.

In minilessons we teach children to value reading. In millions of ways, we celebrate reading. We wear our love of reading on our sleeves. "I want reading, this year, to be the best experience you've ever had in your life," Daria Rigney said at the beginning of a minilesson. The day before, a couple of her fifth graders had seemed to fritter away a few moments of reading time, and Daria wanted to be clear that doing this was incomprehensible to her. "If you are not cherishing reading time, we need to talk about that," she said, "I don't want us to waste one precious moment of the reading workshop." Once I watched Daria gather her students around her for a minilesson and say, "I want to talk about any dazzling reading experiences you've been having."

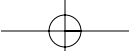
Nell responded, "I read *Catherine Called Birdy* this weekend. I read in my loft bed with a flashlight, and I just blocked out everything else in my head so I could really feel I was in those times, you know, olden times, no electricity."

Nodding, affirming every word, Daria echoed Nell's sentiments. "Don't you just love it when you are so close to a book that you feel you are part of it?" Whether she realizes it or not, Daria is teaching her children. The teacher who announces to her students, "I'm going to quiz you at the end of every chapter of this book, because otherwise I know you won't read it," is also teaching powerful lessons, as is the teacher who says, "No talking during reading because it's never about your books." Now Daria turned to the rest of the class. "What else has been dazzling you lately?"

Kevin said, "I started *Bud, Not Buddy*. Stephen told me about it and it's so neat! There's different words and it's historical."

"So you are dazzled by reading a different kind of book," Daria confirmed. "One where the language is rich and delicious. How about you, Sue? We know what a rich reading life you have."

Listening to Daria, I couldn't help but notice the ways in which she supports her kids' progress toward becoming avid readers. When Kevin



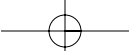
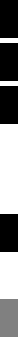
described *Bud, Not Buddy* by saying, “There’s different words,” Daria nodded, acting as if she was simply affirming what he had said, and proceeded to expand on his comment. “You are dazzled by reading a different kind of book, one where the language is rich and delicious.” Daria’s enthusiasm sweeps Kevin along, teaching not only strategies but also values. The language Daria uses to convey these values is as important as the activities she models within the minilessons.

Reading Time

After the reading minilesson, children go to private “reading nooks” or to their desks to read alone, usually for thirty to forty minutes. This—actual reading time—is the most important part of the reading workshop. When we teach reading, we are teaching children to do something. Children can’t learn to swim without swimming, to write without writing, to sing without singing, or to read without reading. If all we did in the independent reading workshop was to create a structure to ensure that every child spent extended time engaged in reading appropriate texts, we would have supported readers more efficiently and more effectively than we could through any elaborate plan, beautiful ditto sheet, or brilliant lecture.

Children learn to read by reading, and they aren’t doing enough reading. A U.S. Department of Education longitudinal study of almost 25,000 eighth graders found that students watched television an average of 21.2 hours a week but spent a mere 1.9 hours a week outside school reading, and that included homework. When literate fifth graders were monitored to determine how they spent their free time, 90 percent devoted less than 1 percent of their time to reading. In contrast, they spend 33 percent of their time watching television (Trelease, 1995).

It is no small goal, then, to give our students long stretches of time each day to read the books they are able to read. Anyone familiar with American classrooms knows that long stretches of time for reading are quite rare. Only 40 percent of fourth-grade classrooms have anything resembling an independent reading workshop. It reminds me of when my son Miles was in first grade. He studied food and found to his amazement that there was no chocolate in chocolate jimmies and no chicken in packaged chicken soup. Sometimes it seems that there is no reading in reading classrooms. We can see this not only in the statistics but also in the materials. I recently learned of a 98-page teachers guide to accompany Ruth Krauss’ 99-word book, *The Carrot Seed*. Frank Smith tells

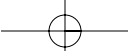


about one very short story, “Rico and the Red Pony,” in which he found seven “literal comprehension” questions, five “interpretive thinking” questions, five “critical thinking” questions, and three “creative thinking” questions. There were more questions than words in the story. Many American children run through this kind of pedagogical treadmill day after day (Smith, 1995, p. 4).

In his book *Time for Meaning*, Randy Bomer, the former co-director of our Project who is currently professor of education at Indiana University, tells of a day he gathered language arts teachers together and asked, “What topics are you expected to teach?” As each teacher called out one thing or another, Randy wrote the topic on the chalkboard: poetry, punctuation, debate, parts of speech, fables, word processing, media studies, the cueing systems, revision, myths, note-taking, author studies, summarizing, predicting, memoir, using a table of contents, reading with expression, character studies . . . “As the flood of items slowed to a trickle,” Randy writes, “a pall of hopelessness settled over the room, and rightly so.” We need more time with our students. But time is life. How could there be more time? “What we really mean when we say, ‘time is the problem,’” Randy says, “is that it’s hard to choose and control what we do with the time we have. What we do with time is what we do with our lives. When we are unable to spend time on what we most value, it is because we have not found a clarity of purpose” (p. 2).

If our goal is to help children compose richly literate lives, then we need to give them time each day to do just that. The independent reading workshop needs to be as central to the teaching of reading as the writing workshop is to the teaching of writing. Too often, we suggest our children “carry on” with their reading while we catch up on paperwork, tutor a student, meet with a small group, or resolve a recess issue. But why do these things draw us away from reading rather than from any other part of our day? When we’re not fully invested in the independent reading workshop, what message does this convey to our students? Why would we collect milk money or teach one guided-reading lesson after another during the independent reading workshop? Our kids are busy composing reading lives before our eyes and we’re missing the show—and it’s the greatest show on earth!

Independent reading is far from the entire reading curriculum, but what children do during independent reading should affect, and be affected by, the entire curriculum. Too often in the teaching of reading, the separate components of the reading curriculum exist independently of each other. Young children gather on the carpet to chime along as the teacher points to the words of “If you give a mouse a cookie, he’s going to ask for a [Post-it] of milk.” The

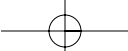


youngsters draw on several strategies to guess the word masked by the Post-it and develop a repertoire of ways to respond when they encounter Post-its masking words in texts. But do these children understand how to use these strategies in their independent reading lives, where there are no Post-its over words? Independent reading needs to be scaffolded, to use Jerome Bruner's term, and supported by read-alouds, book talks about shared texts, explicit instruction in skills and strategies, interactive writing, guided reading and other small-group reading instruction, and the writing workshop.

Teachers of beginning or emergent readers may be having a hard time imagining a classroom filled with first graders carrying on as readers because, as these teachers say, "They can't—you know—*read*." It's a curious thing, but it is rare for a teacher to tell me her children can't carry on as *writers*. In the writing workshop, we accept and teach into our children's approximations of writing. In Chapter 13, I describe how we sometimes shorten the reading workshop for kindergarten and early first-grade children (adding more time for interactive writing, shared reading, word work, and so forth), and I explain that we expect children to approximate reading if they cannot yet read print, and that we find many ways to scaffold both their emergent readings and their early work with little books. I hope this book shows how important it is to give children at every proficiency level time to read on their own.

The Tools That Support Reading Time: Bookshelves: Following the minilesson, when children head off to read, they carry what we call their "bookshelves" with them, sturdy baggies or plastic 9x12-inch magazine boxes. Each bookshelf holds the books the child is reading and the child's reading tools—bookmarks, a reading conference record sheet, and a log of books read. In first grade, children may have as many as ten tiny books, usually all at a roughly similar level, in their bookshelf collection. Meanwhile, a fifth grader who is reading chapter books may have just two. The contents of the bookshelves might include:

- a reading log in which readers list the titles of the books they've read, the dates they began and finished reading those books, the time they spent reading, and so on.
- a clipboard-sized white board with accompanying pen for interactive writing sessions, guided reading, or word work.
- one or more short texts (perhaps an editorial, a short story, a poem) that may be used for small-group work (perhaps for guided reading).
- a bag for carrying a book or two between home and school.

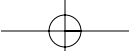


- a laminated alphabet chart and/or a copy of the high frequency words that class has studied and posted alphabetically on the word wall.
- magazines or newspapers for nonfiction reading.
- a note from the teacher left the previous evening recommending a title or challenging the reader to read more each night.
- a record of conferences, conference suggestions, and skills taught.
- bookmarks.
- a timer the child can use when reading with a partner to determine when to read and when to put the book down to talk.

We're wildly enthusiastic about these bookshelves because, frankly, they have managerial as well as instructional advantages. Our primary children tend to have a set day when the entire class, or a smaller group, of them "go to the library" in their classroom. In Ginny Lockwood's first grade at P.S. 116 in Manhattan, for example, children regard Monday mornings as "shopping time." Ginny typically gives her children a pep talk about choosing books, and then she and the children return last week's books and refill their bins with new books. Of course, a child may go to the library on another day, but the recurring ritual of the Monday morning book exchange helps teachers keep books circulating through children's lives. We want to be certain that beginning readers often have new texts in their hands, for those texts bring with them opportunities to do new problem-solving work. Our upper-grade children do not generally have an established library time but go when they need new books and select several books during any one visit.

Because children have a bunch of books "on deck," when they finish one book, they immediately begin the next, without roaming around the classroom. Before we had bookshelves, beginning readers especially seemed to spend a great deal of time running back and forth to the library to return finished books and select new ones. The classroom library began to have all the problems that the stairwell used to have when I taught in an urban high school, becoming not only the social hub but also the place for arguments and congestion. The bookshelves changed this by supporting engagement in sustained reading.

The bookshelves certainly help us with management, but they also help us with assessment. When we draw our chairs alongside children to observe as they read, we can, with a glance, see if today's book is representative of what that child has been reading. Does this reader seem to choose humorous light books consistently? Might we want to nudge him to widen his repertoire? We can also look over bookshelves once the day is over, reviewing what particular

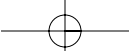
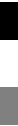
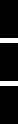




children have been reading and making note of the conversations we want to have. Sometimes we leave “book gifts”—a book by a favorite author or an article about a series the child is reading—in the child’s bookshelf.

Children do not, of course, make all the decisions about what they will read. As I explain in later chapters, we teach children to choose “just right” books, steering them to read mostly those books they can handle with ease. We also teach children how to ratchet up to work with books that are a notch too difficult for them and how to get extra support from a parent, a friend or from us if they want to read particularly challenging texts.

The Structures That Support Reading Time: Reading Nooks: Along with bookshelves, there is a second structure that helps enormously during the reading time portion of our reading workshops: reading nooks. We support classroom management and stamina when we ask readers to find a private reading place for themselves. Usually we introduce the idea gradually. At the start of the year, all children read at their desks. Some children profit from always reading at their desks, especially those who are still shaky at tracking



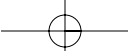
print and need their books to lie steady on the desk. After a few weeks we're apt to suggest to five or six readers that they might each carefully select a nook somewhere in the classroom that might become that child's private reading space. We don't call these nooks isolation zones, but they function as such. "Put your name on a Post-it and leave it to mark your space. We'll see if that space works for you. Are you able to work on your reading there?" Sometimes teachers describe a reading place as "a cozy, comfortable corner to curl up in." I prefer to describe reading nooks as places to do your best work. (And I would definitely *not* expect children to do their best work in the far corner of the coat closet.) Eventually, half the class may be reading at their desks (with empty seats beside them, which allows us to pull in easily to confer), while others each have a long-term "reading nook."

Meanwhile, we let children know that what they are doing—finding places in their lives for reading—is part of making a reading life. Children soon come to school with stories of how they brought lamps into closets and turned them into reading places. Conversations like these are not only about making places for reading, they are also about establishing the ritual of reading before one goes to sleep, on Saturday mornings in bed, and often during the day.

Teaching During Independent Reading

During independent reading, teachers confer with children individually and in partnerships. A teacher may also gather a cluster of children together for a strategy lesson around a shared text. Sometimes the strategy lesson incorporates the various books children are already reading (this might be a repeat of the mini-lesson). A teacher may also gather a small group for a guided-reading session in which the teacher introduces a new and shared book, supports the children's progress through that book, and watches for a teaching point to emerge.

The content for this instruction will come from two sources. First, the teachers will each have approached their year with a curricular calendar containing units-of-study, which they envision embarking on as a classroom community during the year. That is, although many of the structures of the reading workshop will remain steady, the class will usually be "on-about" a shared inquiry or unit. Just as children in a writing workshop might focus on writing poetry for a while and then memoir, children in the reading workshop might focus on having book talks for awhile and then on reading non-fiction. (I discuss this in Sections III and IV.) Sometimes, the content of a



teacher's instruction during independent reading grows out of that teacher's particular focus during that period. If a class of second graders has been doing a lot of nonfiction reading, the teacher may work with small groups to help them read, attending not only to surprising details but also to the author's main ideas.

Then, too, when we confer, we also draw on our knowledge of each child as a reader and a person. As I discuss in Chapters 8 and 9, we do formal and informal assessments often and develop instructional plans based on these and on our knowledge of how readers develop. We may approach one conference or strategy lesson already knowing that this child is a gist reader, recalling only the barest bones of texts, and another conference already knowing that this child reads as if in a cocoon, shut off from everything but the world of the story.

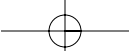
Partnerships in Support of Independent Reading

When most of us imagine a reader, we envision a solitary someone curled up with a book, but the truth is that reading and writing are always embedded in talk with others. In her book, *On Being Literate*, Margaret Meek writes,

When we think of “a reader” we may have a romantic vision of someone sitting alone, reading a book, silently, with enough leisure to read at length without interruption, the kind of reading busy people say they wish they had more time to do. The fact is, readers read wherever and whenever they can, often together ... as we read we turn the monologue of the book into a dialogue (1991 p. 33).

Margaret Meek asked teachers to write their reading histories. In looking them over she found that these narratives were not tales of solitary journeys. “I used to believe that reading was a solitary activity and literacy a cloistered virtue pursued at school.... Now I know reading as a fully social activity,” she writes. “We were always in dialogue with others—those who taught us to read, those for whom we wrote, who lent us books, shaped our preferences, encouraged us, forbade us even” (p. 234).

The books that matter in our lives are the books we have discussed. “It takes two to read a book,” Alan Purves has said, and it is true in my life that the books I remember most are those I have shared. If I simply ask people, “What are you reading in your independent reading life today?” and then, “Is there something social behind this book? Was it recommended by someone? Is it part of a conversation with someone?,” it soon becomes clear that our so-called “independent” reading lives are not independent after all.



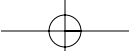
Interestingly enough, although most upper-elementary and middle school classrooms put great emphasis on teacher-supported book talks about teacher-chosen books, children are rarely encouraged to talk about the texts they read independently. If book talks are so integral to our teacher-sponsored curriculum, why wouldn't we want to do everything possible to be sure that students initiated book talks in their independent reading lives?

It is by talking about books that children learn to conduct a dialogue in their minds, to think about books even when they read alone. In our reading workshops, partnerships support talking, and therefore thinking about texts.

Partnerships in Primary Classrooms: When our children read with a partner, they are reading with someone who likes to read the same kinds of books. This means that reading partnerships are roughly ability-based, although we don't label them as such. This is especially true in the primary grades. Because readers actually process print together, the partners need to be able to read the same books. If one child is a much stronger reader than the other, the stronger reader tends to do most of the work (and get most of the practice).

When children have spent as much time as possible reading alone and their stamina seems strained, we give them a second wind by suggesting that it's time for them to read with partners. When K–2 partners meet, one child typically chooses a book she has already read from her bookshelf. Then the two readers look over the book together. Because this book “belongs” to one of the partners, the book's “owner” will do what amounts to a book introduction for her partner. Then the partners decide how they'll read the book. Once children can read books on the level of Rylant's *Henry and Mudge* series or Lobel's *Frog and Toad* series, we encourage them to read books silently to themselves. Now their partnerships resemble those of upper-grade readers. Until then, however, children tend to read aloud by following one of these formats:

- Choral reading, holding one copy of the book between the two readers
- Taking turns (with books that contain just a line or two on a page, we encourage readers to alternate after a few pages rather than a single page because this helps them get into the swing of a text before they swap)
- Echo reading (one child reads a chunk of pages and the other rereads “to make it smooth”)
- Taking Parts (“You be Frog, I'll be Toad.”) This is often done in the second reading of a text, and only some texts lend themselves to this.



- “I’ll read a book to you (and you help if I get stuck) and then we’ll talk about it. Then you read one to me.”

If the teacher has made a big point of insisting that children not jump in quickly to help each other past every difficulty, they learn to wait for their partner “to have a go,” piping in with help only after the partner solicits support. Frequently, one partner will say to another, “Let’s look at the picture.” “Could it be...?” Of course, sometimes the child who knows the troublesome word simply produces it. Because these readers also have lots of opportunities to read on their own, we do not worry a great deal over the times when children produce the correct words for each other.

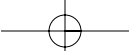
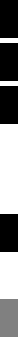
“The division between private and partnership reading supports my kids’ stamina as readers,” Kathy Collins says. “At the start of the year in my first grade, private reading time lasts only ten minutes before the children begin to fray around the edges. We work toward half an hour of sustained private reading each day, but it takes time.”

When children read books alone during private reading time, they eventually learn to note, with a bookmark or Post-it, sections they want to talk about later with their partners. (I discuss this in more detail in Chapter 15.) When partners meet together, we usually ask them to read through the book together first and then return to the book to talk about the marked pages.

Teachers who have visited our primary classrooms sometimes find that when they try to replicate what they have seen, the structures don’t necessarily work for them. The truth is that these structures don’t always work for us, either. We may spend several weeks demonstrating to children the tiniest ways in which good partners work together.

“What a great partner I have!” Renee Dinnerstein said, bringing out her book and putting it between herself and her student teacher. At this point, Renee took a brief step back from the role-play and, in a stage whisper said to the audience of children, “Now watch how I look at my partner while we talk.” Then the reenactment continued. Details such as the importance of sitting side by side, of having only one copy of the book, and of holding it between the two partners aren’t details at all when it comes to primary partnerships. But the good news is that children are amenable to instruction.

Partnerships Between Proficient Readers: Partnerships vary not with age but with reading proficiency. It’s not always the case that *all* upper-grade readers are proficient readers or that all first graders are beginning readers. If fifth graders are beginning readers, their partnerships will be very much like the



ones I've just described. On the other hand, if first graders are reading early chapter books, these readers need to read silently, and they probably need more support in comprehension than in reading the words on the page. A good rule of thumb is that once a child is reading books at the level of Rylant's popular *Henry and Mudge* series, it is probably not wise to ask that child to read aloud frequently, because it leads to subvocalizations, to excessive worry about accuracy, and to a concern with performance rather than comprehension.

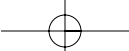
Sometimes children seem so pleased with their facility at processing print that they roll along through sentences and pages without anything registering. A troubling number of readers read without giving close and thoughtful attention to the text. These readers may become adept at disguising the fact that they don't recall the texts by producing flowery talk. "It really made me feel I was there," they say, but when pressed, they can sometimes offer very little detail about the world of the story. If we want readers to hold themselves accountable for coming away from a text with a more detailed sense of what that text holds, one way to do this is to encourage those in upper-grade partnerships to reminisce over and retell the sections of books they've just read. Being able to retell a text is not sufficient for true comprehension, but it is a place to start. Within a very short while, partners will also begin to talk in other ways about books.

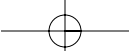
When our upper-grade children meet in partnerships to talk about books, there will be times when it is beneficial if both members of the partnership are progressing at the same time through the same book. There will be many other times, however, when this is less necessary.

Management During the Independent Reading Workshop

A reading workshop requires strong classroom management. Many teachers worry that a classroom of children won't be engaged enough in their reading to allow us, as teachers, to work with individuals and small groups. We've found that individual bookshelves, reading nooks, and partially leveled libraries (described later) help enormously, because these structures make it more likely that children sustain interest in a book or in several books. Here are some other strategies teachers have successfully used to manage reading workshops:

- In some workshops, teachers expect that if children have conferred with or met with them during the preceding day, they remain on the rug





a second reading time, this one devoted to a particular kind of reading. In some classrooms, children use this time to reread familiar books aloud in partnerships to practice fluency and phrasing. In other classrooms, children use this time to read nonfiction or picture books.

In the end, the best thing we can do to nourish and energize our students' independent reading lives is to nourish and energize our own. We need to make the time to burrow under the covers and read that tantalizing book gathering dust on the nightstand, to read the newspaper, to track down the picturebook we adored when we were six, to order the new Oprah book everyone is raving about, or the new Pulitzer Prize winner or that latest sleazy beach book. We need to do this because, by reading, we layer our experience and develop greater breadth and depth to draw on in our teaching. But we need to do this most of all, because when we love reading, when we ourselves draw power and strength and peace from reading, we educate our students' imagination about what their own world of reading can be.

