



Reading and
Writing
Memoir
With 4th Graders and
Teacher Candidates

"I've never seen them so engaged. I truly saw my students living like readers and writers. It is wonderful to see them so focused. My students were asking to work on their memoirs when it wasn't even class time. You did not just tell, you modeled how. My 4th graders loved spending time with the college students."¹

These are the reflective comments of 4th-grade teacher Kelly Klein at the conclusion of a four-week reading and writing workshop focused on memoir. Ralph Fletcher's book, *How to Write Your Life Story*,² provided the inspiration for this genre study. Fourth graders and teacher-education students explored, side by side, how to read and write memoirs. The classroom teacher—and the university professor who wrote this article—grew professionally through collaborative planning and assessment. I invite JOURNAL readers to view snapshots of this memoir workshop to better understand the impact of immersion in a genre.

The Context

*Pathways*³ is the Reading/Language Arts curriculum adopted for use in elementary classrooms throughout the North American Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church (United States, Canada, and Bermuda). This theme-based curriculum includes reading and writing workshops as critical components of instruction and learning. A workshop devoted to memoir correlates with the *Pathways* theme, "Personal Feelings and Growth." Having four weeks of immersion as readers and writers of a genre should positively impact engagement and the quality of reading and writing.

Being a passionate advocate of teacher modeling, I believe that preservice teachers also benefit from demonstration and immersion. I wondered if their understandings of memoir would be enhanced through participation in a genre study. I also wanted to determine the impact of professor modeling on the pedagogical understandings of preservice teachers.

Assumptions of the Workshop Approach

What does it mean to live like a memoir writer? To answer this question, educators must consider the assumptions inherent in the workshop approach to teaching reading and writing:

- honoring both the writing process and the product;
- ensuring prolonged immersion in a genre;
- building and nurturing a community of readers and writers;
- creating a planning and teaching process that is invitational, purposeful, intentional, responsive, and authentic;
- recognizing the generative nature of acquiring knowledge;
- planning for a gradual releasing of responsibility; and
- celebrating the product.⁴

Because I care deeply about inviting students to be readers and writers who are thinkers and who experience changed lives because of reading and writing, I concluded that conducting a genre study would ensure that learning experiences would be engaging, meaningful, and transformative.

Intentional Planning and Preparation

With anticipation, I envisioned both the process and the product of this memoir study. I did not yet know the 4th-grade students, but I was familiar with the features of the genre.

The teacher and I reviewed the 4th-grade language-arts standards, highlighting the ones that would be addressed and assessed, and prepared appropriate materials. It was fun filling a Biography Box, including artifacts that represented my significant memories. I created interview protocols for pre- and post-assessments. Vignettes and excerpts, found in chapter memoirs, were prepared for shared reading experiences. Legal paper (many writers prefer to write drafts on legal paper), memoir pens, and Post-It notes were put in writing folders for each student.

I began gathering resources, such as picture book and chapter memoirs. I searched my online database,⁵ using the memoir and personal narrative tags to locate books for this study. After creating a list of recommended memoir titles, I went to the library and checked out those books. I was grateful to find examples of memoirs written by both elementary students and former teacher candidates. I searched the Bible and found that Isaiah 6, Jeremiah 1, and Ezekiel 1 and 2 are examples of memoirs in which young people are called by God. I even considered hymns whose lyrics might be examples (e.g., "I Come to the Garden Alone," "I Love to Tell the Story," and "It Is Well With My Soul").

Next, I purchased 10 Baby Ruth candy bars. I bought a jelly jar, emptied it, and peeled off the label. Throughout the study, I would refer to these items from my life experiences when doing demonstration writing and modeling of my thinking.

I immersed myself in additional study of the memoir genre. I reread *How to Write Your Life Story*, making notes on what to emphasize in mini-lessons and shared reading lessons. I continued to refine my understanding of memoir by rereading Nanci Atwell⁶ and Heather Latimer,⁷ and collecting quotes about living like a writer of memoir from Jean Little's *Little by Little*,⁸ and Jean Fritz' *Homesick: My Own Story*.⁹ I collected ex-

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cerpts of memoir and personal narratives from *Boy*¹⁰ and *Knots in My Yo-Yo String*.¹¹ I perused my writer's notebook for examples of memoirs I had written. Finally, I was prepared and with anticipation awaited the first day of the project.

The Product Begins With the Process

To become memoir writers, students need to learn the comprehension strategies that will enable them to engage as readers of this genre and immerse themselves in reading memoirs and personal narratives.

The intended product of this study was a “published” memoir written by each 4th grader and teacher candidate. The process included days of prewriting when the students explored memoir, collected ideas, told meaningful life stories, considered their audience, gleaned writing tips from Ralph Fletcher's book, *How to Write Your Life Story*, and learned to stand on the shoulders of authors who have published memoirs. By creating initial drafts,



the students developed stamina as writers, practiced giving and receiving meaningful feedback, and compared their drafts to their thinking about memoir. The students learned that the purpose of editing is to show respect for those who will read their memoirs. In the publication stage, the students learned to write dedications and “about the author” pages. This process culminated in an author celebration that included peers, teacher candidates who served as writing coaches, family, and friends.

Immersion Through Reading the Genre

In the book *Study Driven*, Katie Wood Ray establishes the premise for effective writing in any genre. “What have you read that is like what you're trying to write?”¹² For 90 minutes a day, four days a week, the elementary students and teacher candidates received guidance in how to read and write memoirs through interactive read-alouds, shared reading, and independent reading. The theme text for shared reading was Fletcher's book, *How to Write Your Life Story*. However, the students and teacher candidates were much more impressed with the large selection of memoirs they could choose to read during buddy

reading and independent reading.

Building a Community of Readers and Writers

We were fortunate to have the invaluable gift of time—90 minutes to launch our study of memoir. Every one of those minutes had to be invitational in order to create a new and thriving community of readers and writers. Reading and writing were integrated into the process of collectively generating an understanding of memoir. The schedule included assessment and prewriting activities. Here is the outline of that first day, along with the purposes for each learning experience:

- Biography Box shared with students (Community Building, Prewriting)
- “Let's Get Acquainted” interactive activity (Community Building, Prewriting)
- Interviews conducted by teacher candidates (Assessment, Community Building)
- Storytelling of a published memoir (Motivation, Community Building)
- Read-aloud, *How to Write Your Life Story*, chapter 1 (Generating Understanding)
- Instruction to make and introduce Biography Boxes (Community Building, Prewriting)

Making Teaching Invitational, Intentional, and Authentic

Each reading lesson was crafted to engage students in authentic and invitational purposes related to reading. Objectives for reading instruction included (1) nurturing motivation, (2) teaching and reinforcing reading strategies important for comprehending memoir, (3) engaging students in meaningful talk that revealed their thinking, (4) reading like writers, and (5) applying what they learned when writing their own memoir.

Because we recognized the unlimited potential of combining reading and writing, each 90-minute block included 45 minutes of reading instruction that related directly to the 45 minutes of writing.

Reading instruction included several types of read-alouds. Some allowed participants to experience the aesthetic pleasure of memoir. Others were intentionally interactive, which enabled the students and the teacher candidates to generate theories about memoir. The teacher and teacher candidates modeled comprehension strategies during read-alouds.

Most of the scheduled daily reading and writing mini-lessons were identified or created prior to the study, while others were added in response to the needs of the readers and writers. (See the sidebar on the next page for the list of reading and writing mini-lesson topics.)

Shared reading focused on learning to read like a writer. Independent reading prepared the 4th graders to read memoir with prosody (appropriate expression). The planners and students created a checklist of what good readers do, which was used for reference and after assessment. The 4th graders each assessed the prosody skills of their teacher candidate, who in turn assessed the skills of the 4th graders. Independent reading time included some buddy reading as students focused on the process skills of prewriting and revision.

Writing Workshop mini-lessons included:

- Sharing Biography Boxes (Prewriting)
- What Is a Memoir? (Prewriting)
- Making a List to Find a Memoir (Prewriting)
- Additional Ways to Find a Memoir (Prewriting)
- Telling the Story First (Prewriting)
- Using an Idea Web (Prewriting)
- Determining Audience (Prewriting)
- The Glue: Focus of a Memoir (Prewriting)
- Finding the Right Form (Prewriting)
- Possible Titles (Prewriting)
- Demonstration Drafting (Drafting)
- Writing Like Writers (Drafting)
- Demonstration: Keep the Pen Moving (Drafting)
- What Writers Do When They Get Stuck (Drafting)
- What About the Details? (Drafting/Revision)
- How Can You Show Me Rather Than Tell Me? (Drafting/Revision)
- Good Things I Found in Your Drafts (Revision)
- Hooks and Leads (Revision)
- Spice It Up (Revision)

- I Might Do This (Revision Tools)
- Using an Editing Checklist (Editing)
- Details in the Illustrations (Publishing)
- Parts of Our Book (Publishing)

Titles of reading mini-lessons included:

- Memoir—How Do We Know What It Is?
- “Interviewing” an Author to Learn About Memoir
- Memoir—What Good Readers Do (multiple lessons)
- Prosody Clues Provided by Author
- Choosing a Memoir Structure That Works for Me
- How You [Students] Were Engaged as Readers
- Text-to-Self Connections
- Specific Text-to-Self Connections
- Text-to-World Connections
- Living Differently Because of Memoir
- Questioning the Author
- Detective Clues (Creating Sensory Images)
- Rereading for Deeper Meaning
- Reading Like a Writer of Memoir (multiple lessons focusing on literary craft)

The Generative Nature of Acquiring Knowledge

In the workshop approach, students regularly generate theories and apply them. At times, the mini-lessons were designed to give the teacher opportunities to share her expertise, but more frequently, students worked to generate understandings.

Following is an example of an anchor chart developed after the 4th graders and teacher candidates engaged in buddy reading a published memoir. The topic for this day was reading comprehension, and the focus was *accountable talk*. As they read, I made anecdotal observations about the kind of thinking talk in which I saw them engaging. We used those observations as students generated a theory about the kind of thinking and talking that is a part of reading memoir.

Our Thinking Talk While Reading Memoir

As readers and thinkers, we. . .

- Compared illustrations to text
- Pointed out specifics in the illustrations
- Asked for meanings of words
- Reread for clarity
- Discussed text-to-self connections
- Referred to previous pages to “support” thinking
- Questioned the author
- Shared opinions
- Noticed the colophon (notes on the title page about the way illustrations were created)
- Inferred (purposes and moods of characters, setting, etc.)
- Clarified when something was confusing
- “Sometimes we think so much we can’t put it [the book] down”

(a 4th-grader’s statement as the chart was being generated).

Honoring the Gradual Release of Responsibility

Although the gradual release of responsibility¹³ is well documented in professional literature, teachers often fail to design units that honor this principle of effective teaching. I wanted to model this principle to teacher candidates as well as to the 4th graders. Keeping this in mind, I crafted lessons in the following sequence: Students (1) observed the expert (demonstration reading and writing), (2) learned with the expert (shared reading and writing), (3) were guided by the expert (guided practice in reading and writing), and (4) worked as the expert (independent reading and writing).¹⁴

An example of this principle was the mini-lesson for writing a lead, which included shared reading. Fourth graders could not be expected to know how to write effective leads before being introduced to examples written by experts, so they read a number of leads and then identified what each author did well. After reading and defining effective leads, the students practiced writing different leads for their memoirs. This gradual release of responsibility—demonstration, sharing, guided practice, and independent writing—was the structure used in writing workshops throughout the memoir study. The sources for experts were the published memoirs and the demonstration writing in which I modeled my thinking while writing parts of my own memoir.

Celebrating the Product

The teacher candidates, 4th graders, and a host of family and friends waited expectantly for the typed and illustrated mem-

oirs, including a dedication and “About the Author” page, which were distributed to the 4th graders by their teacher candidate coaches. The coaches also had the memoirs they had prepared for publication. Before we celebrated with cake and punch, each 4th grader read an excerpt from his or her memoir. The beaming faces of these young authors were reflected in the interested reactions of their live audience. There was silence, laughter, gasps, clapping—the kinds of reactions published authors appreciate when given the opportunity to share their work with an audience. Letters were presented to young authors whose memoirs would be purchased for use in future memoir studies. These letters outlined specific examples of what each author had done well in crafting his or her memoir. The affirmations, excited voices, photo opportunities; the lively talk as memoirs were passed around for others to see; and the reluctance for the celebration to end all provided compelling evidence that this memoir study had been a success.

The Impact

Assessment revealed some critical questions that must be considered when teaching reading and writing memoir. Do the students and teacher candidates know the characteristics of memoir as a genre? Do they understand the reading strategies that are necessary for comprehending memoir? Are they aware of the writing decisions made by authors when writing a memoir? Can they define what makes a memoir interesting?

The definition for memoir that I had chosen to guide my own thinking and student learning came from Latimer: “We read and write memoir to figure out our own experiences and to connect with the experiences and wisdom of others . . . A great memoir will cause readers to reflect upon and better understand their own lives and experiences.”¹⁴ Survey data collected at the onset of the study revealed that the 4th graders had little or no idea what a memoir was, and the majority of the teacher candidates also had an incomplete understanding of the genre.

Several formative assessments were used throughout the memoir study— anecdotal notes, conferring, monitoring student understandings as anchor charts were created, checklists based on understandings generated by students, observational checklists, editing checklists, and surveys. Reference was frequently made to the language-arts standards to ensure that appropriate standards were being addressed. Assessments were used to plan instruction as well as to measure the effects on student learning.

I conducted pre- and post-surveys to determine whether the study was helpful for the teacher candidates. Prior to the study, their mean score (on a four-point scale) for “How well I understand the workshop approach to teaching” was 2.1. At the conclusion of the study, the mean was 3.71. The mean for “How well I know how to teach memoir to students” increased from 1.37 to 3.28. The pre-study mean for “How beneficial it will be to observe the professor modeling the workshop approach” was 3.87, but at the conclusion, it had risen to 4.00. Clearly, the teacher candidates benefitted from this immersion and demonstration.

I purposefully chose to conduct the memoir study in the classroom of a first-year teacher. I wanted to provide a new teacher with modeling, collaborative planning, and reinforcement for what had been learned in preservice courses. She

joined her students in writing a memoir, taught several of the lessons, and participated in collaborative planning and assessment. The comments at the beginning of this article came from the reflective journal that she kept. She concluded her journal with the comment, “A teacher’s excitement and interest truly motivates a student to work hard.”¹⁵

Final Reflection

At the end of the memoir study, I reflected on my own learning as well as that of the 4th graders and teacher candidates. My understanding of the writing process, genre studies, memoir, and teaching were strengthened. I recognized things I would do differently. For example, anecdotal observations revealed that 4th graders found it difficult to seamlessly include the text-to-world connections inherent in memoir. I believe that this age group would do better with a study in personal narrative that builds a foundation for memoir studies in 6th to 8th grades. Feedback from teacher candidates reinforced the idea that being vulnerable made me more credible as a university professor. Finally, I have concluded that prolonged immersion in authentic learning provides both teachers and students with a sense of fulfillment and accomplishment. ✍



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NOTES AND REFERENCES

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2. Ralph Fletcher, *How to Write Your Life Story* (HarperCollins, 2007).
3. *Pathways* (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall Hunt Publishing Company, 2007).
4. Nanci Atwell, *In the Middle* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1998), Lucy Calkins, *The Art of Teaching Writing* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1994), and Regie Routman, *Writing Essentials* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2004). While this list of assumptions is my own, they are informed by my understandings from these seminal works on the writing workshop approach.
5. Go to <http://librarything.com>. Type **Krystal Bishop** in the Search site and click on **Members**. You will find an online database of more than 900 children’s books with tags and comments for teachers.
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13. Routman, *Writing Essentials*, op cit.
14. Lattimer, *Thinking Through Genre: Units of Study in Reading and Writing Workshops 4-12*, op cit., p. 24.
15. Kelly Klein journal, op cit.