“Yeah, we’re pros.”

Sprawled over two bucket chairs on our carpet area, Jason and Ellie, two of my 6th graders, were discussing with me a new science assignment that involved critical reading and essay writing. The task would be no problem for them, since they already knew how to approach such an activity, but I wasn’t sure how they would respond to the assignment.

However, I had apparently underestimated the culture that had been incubating in my classroom over the past seven months—a culture designed not simply to teach skills and strategies, but also to grow authors and thinkers. The foundation for such an approach involved a culture of talk—the fostering of authentic questioning and identification with real-life writers. In short, we were beginning to see our world through “writers’ eyes.”

What are writers’ eyes? How does one acquire them, and why did I decide to approach learning in this way? An understanding of what is needed for children to assume a literate identity—and the philosophy and components of Authors’ Studies that meet this need—may help explain.

**Philosophy**

Establishing a culture of talk is the initial step in creating a literary community. “Talking and listening to each other” is first among the essential components of active literacy, according to Stephanie Harvey. A culture of talk provides a safe place for students to share ideas as well as an assessment opportunity for the teacher. This assessment, Harvey says, is not the assignment of a score or grade, but rather “the heart of teaching and learning.” Assessment requires that we teachers know our students, which will enable us to make intelligent decisions about their needs and our steps to meet those needs. If we don’t talk to our students, how can we know what is in their minds?

One of the best ways to know what students are thinking is to listen to the questions they ask. Most teachers have experienced those deadly quiet moments when their questions have...
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depending upon what we desire our students to glean from the act. In an attempt to get my students thinking—and talking—my most frequent question after a read-aloud or before any discussion turned out to be, “What are your thoughts?” It was amazing to me how my students responded to such an open question. At first, of course, they weren’t sure. What was this teacher doing, asking for their thoughts? I could hear their uncertainties rumbling. But with much affirmation and continued encouragement, they soon realized I was genuine, and the thoughts, and the questions, began to flow.

This brings up an important point. A teacher must value his or her students’ thoughts before they will value them. Regie Routman says, “Worldwide, the strongest predictor of reading achievement is the quality of student-teacher relations.” I know that my feelings about my students and their contributions are obvious to them. Seeing each child as someone from whom I could learn was an essential step before I could truly appreciate my students’ thoughts. When I genuinely enjoy our discussions, they can tell. And they enjoy them as well.

Effective learning thus involves both a skilled instructor and a student with a healthy literary self-concept. Developing such a community requires a comprehensive instruction strategy. At the core of this community is a forum for “opportunities for discussing literature and other texts.”

An atmosphere of talk leads to authentic questioning. This questioning, fostered and furthered through genuine discussion, prompts thinking autonomy and greater learner independence, earmarks of the Optimal Learning Model based upon Don Holdaway’s developmental and social-learning principles.

What Is an Author’s Study?

I am a terrible fiction writer. That is why, a couple of years ago, I picked up a book called Teaching Writing With Picture Books as Models in an attempt to teach this genre with which I had not had much personal success. As we read and analyzed the author’s craft, as evidenced through his or her picture books, I noticed that my students were reading more deeply. I had not anticipated a change in my students’ reading as a result of studying an author’s writing. They were also discussing the author’s craft with one another and talking more deeply! Unfortunately, I began implementing this reading stance late in the semester, and the school year ended before I was able to pursue it fully.

As I reflected on the experience that summer, I came across Katie Wood Ray’s ideas on using writing techniques and writers’ actual thoughts about their own writing as the basis for creating a writing curriculum—in other words, reading like a writer. The idea of authors’ studies to identify with and promote deeper thinking appealed to me. Our first author’s study the following year was quite organic in its inception. Having casually introduced Gary Paulsen and used his Hatchet as a shared reading to kick off the year, I referred to him and his work quite nonchalantly whenever I learned something new about or from him. There was nothing strategic in my approach, except that many of my students enjoyed Paulsen’s Hatchet so much that they searched for more of his works. As they read other books by Paulsen, they shared with me tidbits they had gleaned about him as a person and as an author. And they began to trace his habits as a writer.

“Gary Paulsen writes a lot about nature,” commented Derek one day. “And a lot of the things he writes about are based on what happened to him.” (Derek had been diagnosed a year earlier as having SLD—Special Learning Disability.)

“I noticed he uses one-word paragraphs sometimes—just one word on a line by itself,” I mused. “Why do you think he does that?”

“I think it’s for emphasis, to make it stand out more,” Derek responded.

“Hmm, so you could do that in your writing, too,” I observed.

Derek nodded. Thus began the first of our experiences with authors’ studies. When we study authors and their craft, our writing foci gen-
erate organically from our observations and curiosities about the authors and their works. This is teaching through inquiry. As we ask questions about the authors and about one another and seek to understand, we think more critically about what we read.

How to Implement

How do we implement a process that changes the way students view literacy? While I do not presume to be an authority on the subject, I want to share what has worked well for me and my students.

1. **Draw out students’ interest in the authors they will be studying.** About a week before I’m ready to introduce our next author, I casually leave his or her books lying around—on my desk, at our easel, and on the table at the front of the room. When students come up to my desk to talk or to ask a question, it is natural for them to notice a new book and pick it up, perusing it while they wait for their turn to speak. “You got new books!” they say, or “Who’s June Ray Wood?” (one of the authors in our studies). I have a bulletin board dedicated to our current author, with biographic information as well as covers of and excerpts from his or her books (a similar bulletin board is dedicated to our classroom authors).

Before we begin reading our current author’s work, I create a simple banner on the bulletin board: “Introducing E. L. Konigsburg,” for example. There follows either the expected “Who’s E. L. Konigsburg?” or “Oh, yes. I think I read something by her!” When the latter occurs, I ask the student to introduce the author to the class. Students get excited when they are recognized as someone with “inside information.”

2. **Introduce the author.** After a week of casual exposure to our new author, I gather my students around me in our carpeted area and officially introduce him or her. I may display and refer to the books the students have noticed on my desk or throughout the room. I may say, “Many of you have been asking me, ‘Who’s [author]?’ Well, today, we’re going to get to know her a little better.”

Next comes a read-aloud of a carefully selected book or other piece of writing by that author. I read only a few pages, just enough to pique their curiosity. Then each student chooses a partner, and they get to know the author better by exploring his or her Website. This is a way to help students realize that authors are real people—with their own growing-up experiences, family vacations, adventures, pets, etc.—and that much of the inspiration and incidents an author uses in his or her writing comes from life experiences. Thus, students come to understand that writing is not so much “magical” as personal experience reflected in a certain form. Such a view removes some of the mystery from the writing process.

3. **Read aloud.** Following this introduction of the author, we gather on the carpet for a read-aloud from the book or piece I used the first day. I ask the students to bring their notebooks so they can jot down anything they notice about the author—language style, preferences, etc.—from what I read. After the read-aloud, I ask, “What did you notice?” We may create an anchor chart to which we add every time we observe something new. But mostly we discuss the author.

Another option is to read a poem a day. When we studied Paul Fleischman, I used his *Joyful Noise* and *I Am Phoenix*, both poetry volumes, from which we read antiphonally and analyzed one poem each class period. I asked the students to quietly read through the poem by themselves, circling any new words (we later used these words to practice context clues for unknown vocabulary). After we read the poem aloud several times, we talked about possible interpretations, as well as the author’s thoughts and intentions behind such usage and/or perspective. Such an exercise helps in building comprehension, fluency, and skills.

4. **Conduct a focus lesson.** After the read-aloud, I teach a short focus lesson (about 10–15 minutes) on a reading or writing element or strategy, such as how story structure reveals a character’s personality. Students practice this strategy with their partners for about 5–10 minutes. Depending upon the nature of the excerpt, we may read from our shared text, watching for the author’s patterns we have noticed in our read-aloud, and listening for ways to use our focus lesson in the day’s reading. At other times, I encourage the students to practice these strategies in their independent reading, helping them to see comparisons or contrasts between our current author and the author of their book.
Benefits

Studying an author’s writing from the observation/inquiry perspective teaches the reader-writer about that author’s method and expression.

By this point, I do not even have to go through the process of explaining how to read like a writer. In everything from read-alouds to shared readings to literature circle discussions, my students have internalized this stance so deeply that it has become their default mode. They can’t help it; their writers’ eyes influence how they read and speak.

Using authors’ studies to guide the reading-writing workshop and as the basis for curriculum makes it possible for all students to be successful. I have witnessed children who, like Derek, struggled with various learning difficulties, drawn in naturally to the discussions and observations of authors and their styles. Why is this so? They are not expected to know the answer, but simply invited to question. Sometimes, in the course of our inquiry, we find the answers; at other times, we decide there are no answers. Instead, our questions may lead us to more questions. And that’s OK. Asking authentic questions, searching for answers, and understanding that sometimes there may be no answers are essential earmarks of an authentic learning environment.

Determining why an author included a particular element, chose a specific word, or created a character’s reaction helps the reader to understand that writers have specific criteria for making these decisions. As the reader begins to understand the need to base decisions upon a desired criterion, he or she can transfer that understanding to his or her own writing—‘‘Why did you choose this word? Why are you creating a character with that flaw?’’ I have asked many times. And, after observing and speculating on the reasons why published authors arrive at a decision, my students are better able to articulate the reasons for their own decisions.18 The process is not only a crucial reading skill, but also a way to empower students to make wise choices.

“It’s Literacy!”

“It’s writing or reading?” Malike, settling onto the carpet with her notebook and pencil, asked one day.

“It’s literacy!” Elizabeth exclaimed.

I smiled. It’s true: Authors’ studies blur lines between subjects. Instead of separate entities, reading, writing, speaking, listening, intake, and understanding together become literacy, a way of thinking, of living—seeing with a writer’s eyes.

“Yeah, we’re pros.” Jason and Ellie stated this so naturally, so confidently that I would have believed them even if I hadn’t been their teacher. But I was their teacher, and I knew that they told the truth. For all practical purposes, they were pros—at sharing their ideas, at fostering of questions, at living the literate life, at seeing the world with writers’ eyes. And, best of all, they knew it.

Sample Author’s Study

Week 1*

Casual Author Introduction

• Display copies of various books by your chosen author as well as other books you deem appropriate for your students’ ages and development levels.

• Create a banner (‘‘Please meet . . . [author]’’), and display it on the bulletin board that you have dedicated to authors’ studies.

• If you wish, casually mention your own reading of one or more of the author’s works (‘‘I was reading [book] last night, and I came across a thought I found interesting . . .’’).

Week 2

Day 1

Formal Author Introduction

• Gather students for the first read-aloud or shared poetry reading.

• Introduce the author and his or her work (‘‘This is a book by one of my favorite authors—you may have heard me mention [his/her] work last week . . . [Give a brief introduction.]’’).

• Provide each student with a copy of the first poem. (You can progress through the book sequentially or choose poems based on your students’ interest.)

• Allow several minutes for students to read the poem and to circle any unfamiliar words, then discuss these words to provide comprehension scaffolding.

• Read the first poem antiphonally. (Each day, I and a student read the left and right columns all the way through in order to model good fluency and pacing. Originally, I had to urge students to volunteer, but soon they competed to be the “model reader.” Even students who struggled with fluency volunteered, and I scheduled them far enough ahead of time so that they could adequately prepare through re-reading, practice of unknown words, etc.)

• Discuss possible interpretations of the poem. (“What are your thoughts on this piece? What jumps out at you? What do we know about [author] from reading [his/her] poetry?”)

• Guide students to the author’s official Website to learn more about him or her as a person and an author.

• Ask students to choose a quote from one of the author’s poems that they might be helpful in their own writing. (As a partner on their assignments, use your computer to print pic-
tures of the author and covers of his or her books, adding them to the “author’s bulletin board” under the banner “Please meet . . . [author]!”

- As students complete their typed mini-posters of the author’s writing advice, help them to display their work.

Day 2

Shared Reading Introduction

- Gather students for the second poetry antiphonal reading, continuing with the book or using another of the author’s works.
- Follow with a discussion of this poem as in Day 1. (“What are your thoughts? Do you notice anything [author] did in this poem that [he/she] also did in the poem from yesterday? What can we tell about [author] from this poem today?” Add to your class’s author anchor chart if you choose to use one.)
- Teach a mini-lesson on using text features (cover, back matter, illustrations) to predict a book’s content before reading.
- Use the book to practice the mini-lesson strategy.
- Begin a shared reading of chapter one of the book. (Make sure each student has a copy of the book.)
- Follow up with a discussion of the first chapter, remembering to invite questioning and inquiry. (“What are your thoughts? What are you unsure about? What questions do you have for this character? What questions do you have for [author]? What do you think of [author’s] writing choices in this chapter? Is there a similarity between [his/her] style here and [his/her] style in the poetry we’ve read so far?” Also, be sure to follow up on your strategy lesson by helping students to validate or correct the predictions they made. It may be helpful to use a “turn-and-talk” approach, assigning small-group discussion, followed by whole-group sharing.)
- Begin independent reading, using the author’s books you or your students have chosen. You may also encourage your students to choose books by other authors, inviting them to apply the strategy they learned during the mini-lesson.
- You may want to give your students an individual assignment to check their understanding of the earlier strategy taught. (Recall, however, that your goal is to create “wide-awake readers” who see the world with writers’ eyes. It is difficult to do this if their eyes are sleepy and drooping from an excess of busy work.)

Days 3 and 4

- Continue the schedule as outlined above: read-aloud/antiphonal reading, strategy mini-lesson, shared reading, independent reading. (You may want to work with guided reading groups during independent reading time.)

Weeks 3 to 5

Digging Into Author’s Study

- Follow the schedule you have designed for your author’s study. (I have found a predictable schedule is important for most students—and their teachers!—especially when trying something new.)
- Your students should keep their own notes—from poetry readings, shared readings, and discussions—about their obser-

vations of the author’s writing craft, which may provide material for a culminating project at the end of your study. (I have used posters and PowerPoint as media for my students to share their thoughts on what they have learned.)
- Celebrate what you and your students have learned with a Celebration Day.
- Rejoice—breathe deeply and smile, knowing you have begun the journey.

* Authors’ Studies units can vary from several weeks to an entire school year, depending on the available time and source materials. For my 6th graders, I found that a four- to nine-week period worked most successfully.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. All student names are pseudonyms.
6. Just think of the possibilities this question holds for your worship time with students! My greatest joy in this journey has been the depth of discussion, of insights on Jesus and His Word, birthed from this simple question. Try it for your next worship or Bible class.
15. Harvey, Reading Comprehension in an Active Literacy Classroom, op cit., p. 5.