A new rendition of an old classic: The young writers program as a writing workshop

Laura Magalas [i]
Nipissing University

Thomas G. Ryan [ii]
Nipissing University

Abstract
The Young Writers Program (YWP) is the latest writing workshop to be developed for the classroom. It challenges students to choose a topic and write a novel-length piece based on that topic, without worrying about spelling or grammar. While the foundation of this philosophy is solid, the support and structure of the Young Writers Program website does not make up for the lack of structure and routine that is instrumental to the implementation and success of other writing workshops. Until it creates a framework that teachers can implement in their classroom, the Young Writers Program has very little direction and very few benefits when compared to other, more successful, writing workshops.

Keywords: Writing, elementary, communication

---

[i] **Laura Magalas** is a graduate of the Schulich School of Education, M.Ed., program at Nipissing University, North Bay, Ontario, Canada. She is an experienced teacher and leader at the elementary level.

Correspondence: tom032@sympatico.ca

[ii] **Thomas G. Ryan** is Professor in the Schulich School of Education, Nipissing University, North Bay, Ontario, Canada. He has been teaching since 1985 and taught elementary students for many years.

Introduction

NaNoWriMo, or National Novel Writing Month is a challenge during the month of November where everyone writes a novel of at least 50,000 words. The only prize you win is the satisfaction of knowing how few people can accomplish the feat of writing a novel in thirty days. Every year 150,000 to 200,000 people put forth the best Jack Kerouac and Ernest Hemingway impersonations possible and write as much, as fast as, possible. Quite possibly the focus is quantity over quality. The idea was first derived by Chris Baty, who had always expressed the interest to write a novel. In 1999, he and a number of friends decided that, not only were they going to write a novel, but they were going to do it in a month. Since then, the sensation has grown exponentially, and it was out of this popularity that the Young Writers Program (YWP) was created.

The Young Writers Program, created in 2004, brings the basic concept of NaNoWriMo into the classroom. Teachers sign up their classes to participate, the students set their word goals, and spend the month writing and trying to achieve them. Press releases from the Young Writers Program organizers claim that novel writing builds fluency, confidence, creativity and time management skills.

Description of the Problem

The Young Writers Program is founded on three rules: (1) the students choose the topic of their novel, (2) importance is placed on quantity of words, not quality (e.g. spelling, grammar, etc.), and (3) the students set their own goals and must achieve them in a month's time. From these three things, and under the guidance of the teacher, the magic is supposed to begin. But how solid is this foundation? Do teachers just set aside time every day for students to write? What about the almighty curriculum? Where does the Young Writers Program fit in? What about the special needs students? Can the Young Writers Program actually work?

Research Questions and Purpose

Herein we focus on three questions:
1. How does the Young Writers Program work?
2. Does the Young Writers Program have a strong, theoretical-based foundation?
3. Are there any ways in which the Young Writers Program could be improved?
4. Is the Young Writers Program a worthwhile venture to implement in the classroom?

In an effort to answer these questions, an evaluation of the Young Writers Program (YWP) unfolds in two ways. First, an examination of the program in terms of what it offers the teacher and students in terms of support and structure. Second, a comparative view of the foundation and framework of the Young Writers Program versus what the research recommends, including successful writing workshops, unfolds herein.

Rationale

The YWP is, in essence, a type of writing workshop. The writing workshop is one of the most successful and highly encouraged methods of teaching literacy in the classroom, especially in the younger grades (Jasmine & Weiner, 2007). The writing workshop process is not only about getting children to write. It has been proven that writing workshops have the ability to build up the confidence of students through writing in a structured environment (Bayer, 1999; Fu & Lamme, 2002). Students are taught important mechanics of writing, such as editing and grammar, but are also given time to write and later share what they've written. It can also be easily redesigned and changed to suit all kinds of students, including students with different learning styles (Hachem, Nabhani & Bahous, 2008; Conroy, Marchand & Webster, 2009), special education students (James, Abbott & Greenwood, 2001), students with disabilities (Enns, Hall, Isaac & MacDonald, 2007) or ESL/ESOL students (Peyton, Jones, Vincent & Greenblatt, 1994). Since the writing workshop model has the potential to be successful on many different levels, it is worth determining whether or not the YWP has the same potential in its construction and implementation.

Methodology

From the onset we looked at recommended writing strategies for students via initial research found within Ebscohost. We then realized the most prominent writing strategies was that of the writing workshop. Deciding to narrow the focus, we began researching the writing workshop model. Ray and Laminack's <u>The Writing Workshop: Working Through the Hard Parts (and they're all hard parts)</u> served as an excellent place to start. It was written as a guidebook for teachers looking to implement the strategy in their classroom, and helped us to first understand how the model was supposed to work. From there we began looking for articles that detailed the writing workshop being put into practice, again using Ebscohost, JSTOR and Scholar's Portal. we found that the dozen articles located often referenced other articles, and using these sources we were not only able to locate articles about writing workshops and their uses, but other topics that are important to the YWP, such as writing under pressure and other forms of writing that the students can write that are accepted by the YWP.

We collected testimonials, press releases and media articles about the program. The website itself contains almost all of the information required about the YWP, with the exception of a Classroom Novel Kit, an incentive package sent to the registered teachers to help encourage and motivate the students. We e-mailed the organizer, Chris Angotti, and explained our interest in the program.

Analysis of Research

The literature review is divided into two sections. The first section examines twenty different writing workshops based on length, class, and structure. It serves as a review of other articles that either play a major role in, or tend to result from, the writing workshop as a whole. The second section deconstructs the YWP as it is laid out on the website, simulating how it might appear to a teacher who is looking at the program for the first time, including all of the support and benefits the website has to offer both the educator and the student.

The Writing Workshops

The primary book that was used to give a general overview of what the writing workshop was and how it worked was the book by Ray and Laminack (2001). In it the authors lay out everything that should be considered when developing a writing workshop, from the content to student choice to the layout of the classroom. The drive of the book is making students write and making the students feel like writers. They state all the important aspects of what should be considered when developing a writing workshop, but they don't do the work for you. The design and frequency of the writing workshop is left to the educator. Due largely to the fact that writing workshops are recommended for younger grades, the majority of the writing workshops recovered were within the range of kindergarten to grade six.

The first writing workshop took place in a third grade classroom. Lensmire (1994) details the layout of his writing workshop, which he teaches every day. In his classroom, he begins with a mini-lesson of about five to ten minutes, followed by thirty minutes of writing time for the students, during which time he allows the students to choose their writing topics. During that time, students are permitted to move around to find a place to right or consult other students or the teacher if they are having difficulty. The final ten minutes of the class is dedicated to sharing time, and each student is permitted to share at least once every week.

In a study by Jones, Reutzel and Fargo (2010), researchers found the writing workshop to be just as successful as interactive writing in a kindergarten classroom. The writing workshop process had four primary parts to it: a mini-lesson, writing period, conferencing, and sharing. The writing workshop was done every day, but didn't say how much time was dedicated to each section. Students were permitted to choose their own topics and work at their own pace. Students were encouraged to use invented spelling rather than ask or look up how to spell every word. The workshop would end with the students sharing their work, and every student would share at least once a week.

Johnson (2001) looked at three beginning teachers who were setting up workshops in their classes for the first time. The workshops lasted five months and were evaluated based on six separate classroom observations and three video recorded classroom sessions towards the end of the five months. The workshop structure included mini-lessons, group discussion, and then writing time, but did not give a time allotment for each, nor did it say how many times a week the writing workshop was run. Students were given their own choice of topics, and all three teachers found this to be beneficial. One teacher found that allowing the students to choose their topics resulted in better writing. The second teacher found that she didn't have to force the students to write once she gave them free choice of what they wanted to write. The third teacher found that allowing the students to choose their topics engaged them so much that it contributed to the success of classroom management.

In a Masters Research Project, Bayer (1999) conducted a writing workshop with a class of first grade students for six months. The writing workshop was held once a month and was broken down to begin with a five to ten minute mini-lesson, followed by thirty-five to forty minutes of writing, during which time teachers would also conference with students and encourage writing, revision and editing. It also mentions that students were allowed to share their work during points of the writing workshop, though it does not indicate the frequency. Bayer (1999) concludes by saying that there was a measured increase in confidence in the students' abilities as writers.

Miller and Higgins (2008) recommend using the writing workshop in conjunction with a reading workshop, and how both of these together can be used successfully for test preparation without focusing only on 'teaching to the test'. They outline the writing workshop in ten steps, and is the most detailed out of the writing workshops in terms of structure. The ten steps are: mini-lesson, teacher models the writing being studied, revising and editing, students brainstorm writing topics, prewriting/planning, writing a rough draft, peer conferences, revise and rewrite, second peer conference, group sharing time, and publish. The article doesn't discuss how much time should be delegated to each task. The authors emphasize the importance of teaching students a wide variety of genres, and make a special note to say that allowing students to choose their topics will encourage creativity and success in all aspects of the writing process.

Fu and Lamme (2002) considered a similar approach and looked at the results of a writing workshop versus the assessment grades of a class of grade three students. The authors felt that some of the assessment tools used to grade students were unfair and wanted to see how their writing looked within a structured writing workshop. Students were allowed to choose their own topics to write on and were allowed to work on one piece of writing for as long as they felt they needed to. The writing workshop was conducted twice a week from January to June. Students were welcome to write and share with other students in the class, but the study did not detail how much time was spent on each. The researchers found that there was a visible difference between the quality and marks of writing in the class versus the quality of writing and marks of the school assessment. One boy, who scored low on his third grade assessment, had made substantial improvements in the writing workshop that were not accurately measured by the assessment. He said that he preferred the writing workshop because it made him feel comfortable, and that he didn't feel compelled to write as fast as everyone else. The researchers concluded that the students have a control over their own learning in the classroom that doesn't transfer over successfully to the assessment methods.

A study by Jasmine and Weiner (2007) aimed to determine the impact that a writing workshop could have on the confidence and independence level of grade one students as writers. The study was seven weeks and looked at nineteen grade one students. The writing workshop was held two to three times per week for a thirty-five to forty minute period each time. Rather than have each period contain all of the different steps important to writing, each week added a new skill to be learned. Each class began with a mini-lesson, after which time the students would begin to write. Each student shared their piece of writing at some point during the first week. After this, another step was added each week. The second week focused on peer conferencing and revision, the third focused on editing, the fourth focused on making corrections, so that by the beginning of the fifth week, the

students had written a first draft, shared, peer conference, revised, edited and rewritten their copies for the final week, during which time they all shared their work. The authors state that the students showed an increase in enthusiasm as they began to understand the process and structure of the writing workshop. They concluded by saying that the writing workshop model "has proven to be an effective instructional method to support first graders in learning the writing process" and meant more to the students when they chose their own topics (Jasmine & Weiner, 2007, p.138).

Pollington, Wilcox and Morrison (2001) examined the impact of teachers in the writing workshop and found that the attitudes of the individual teacher are instrumental in the success of the writing workshop. They surveyed of 130 students from grade four and five classes in which the writing workshop structure was the same. The class started with a sharing time for five to ten minutes, either reading a book or looking at pictures. In some instances, the teacher would share his or her own writing. This would be followed by a five to ten minute mini-lesson. After this, the teacher would take five minutes to discuss with the class what they would be working on during the writing period, either writing or conferencing with classmates or meeting with the teacher. The students were then given thirty to forty minutes to carry this out, and end with another sharing time, this time of the students' work for the final five to ten minutes. Students were allowed to choose their topics and to sit or work where they wanted to. The study concluded that the attitudes of the individual teacher towards the writing workshop had more of an influence than any strategies or approaches used during the workshop.

A study conducted by Enns, Hall, Isaac and MacDonald (2007) studied the role of the writing workshop with three classes of deaf students, one grade four and two grade five. The workshop writing process was outlined as "preparing/planning (prewriting), drafting, revising, editing, and publishing" (Enns et al., 2007, p.6). The writing workshop was done daily for anywhere from one hour to ninety minutes, and was done for three weeks. Students were encouraged to write in English, but were also allowed to write in ASL. The study also encouraged students to choose their own topics, saying that the "children often need to have a purpose for writing" and that "if it's their idea, they're more, much more motivated" (Enns et al., 2007, p.14). Results of the study found that the writing workshop helped students to have an increased sense of ownership in their work, and that the writing workshop also encouraged self-confidence, independence, and knowledge of ASL.

Peyton, Jones, Vincent and Greenblatt (1994) observed the impact of the writing workshop on a group of ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) students, ranging from kindergarten to grade six. The predominant language in the classroom was Spanish. The writing workshop was conducted for both a half semester and a full semester, once a week for thirty minutes. One teacher outlined the workshop as "a 3-min mini-lesson, followed by 12 min of student writing, 10 min of peer conferencing, and 5 min of rewriting", with publication occurring another time (Peyton et al., 1994, p.474). The article mentions that there was initial difficulty and frustration among the teachers and students in the beginning, but that it was successfully worked through. The study allowed students to choose their own topics and emphasized the important in allowing students to have ownership of their writing. They also allowed students to write both in English and their native language, and that this accommodation helped to make them comfortable in their writing. They also recommended visual cues and stories for students who might have difficulty coming up with their own ideas. The study concluded by describing the positive impact that the writing workshop had on the students, but that teachers need to remain flexible and have patience. Not everything will work perfectly from the very beginning, but that you need to have courage and the dedication to continue, and sooner or later, it will come.

Conroy, Marchand and Webster (2009) ran a writing workshop for fifteen weeks in an effort to determine what the impact of a writing workshop would have on a group of seventy students, from kindergarten to grade two. The goal was also to determine whether or not the workshop could be used to motivate students of different intelligences. Students were allowed to choose their own topics for writing, and the writing workshop used mini-lessons combined with a very detailed thorough action plan of week-by-week lessons (but the failed to mention how many times per week the lessons were

taught and how long the periods were for). Each week would build on the previous week, and would include modifications to incorporate for different intelligences if required (e.g. logical/mathematical intelligence). Stories would typically take students two to three weeks to complete, and the writing process included revising, editing, conferencing, publishing and sharing, though the time allotment and frequency for each of these was not indicated. The results of the study indicated that students felt less bored or embarrassed towards writing by the end of the workshop, and that some parents had also discovered their children writing more regularly at home.

The article by Shaw (2001) was one of two writing workshops not conducted within an elementary school setting. The writing workshop was designed for a first year course at Yale University, but can be applied to elementary and secondary classes. Shaw outlines the seven C's that are critical to the construction of any writing workshop: Climate (ensuring everyone feels welcome and equal), Choice (allowing students to write what they want), Communication (students should have a good rapport with the teacher and with each other), Coaching (teacher must find a safe place between being too critical and not critical enough), Connection (giving the student's writing purpose and reason), Collaboration (letting everyone work together to edit and revise each other's work), and Chemistry (where students feel like independent writers when everything else works well together). She concludes by saying that, while teacher guidance is important, the goal is to produce writers who can stand independently and have their own idea of what their writing should be.

Kazemek and Logas (2000) examined a writing workshop not located in a classroom. They observed an intergenerational writing project in which independent seniors spend time writing with students (usually from grades three to five). Every year, the students and seniors work together and publish a volume of their writing. The writing workshop meets every week, and usually has between twelve and fourteen seniors and approximately twenty-five to thirty students. Kazemek and Logas demonstrate how the two groups are able to help each other, and how, like any other classroom or group of students; all of them have special needs and abilities. The study demonstrated that the writing workshop can not only work with both generations but can help to close the gap by combining the two into working together.

Boiarsky (1981) considered the role of a writing workshop as an overarching activity in a middle school. Originally started as a two week write-a-thon, the students in the school would use their forty minute homeroom class as a period dedicated to writing. Students were allowed to write on any topic they selected. The schedule for the workshop required that writing occur on Monday and Wednesday, discussion and conferencing on Tuesday and Thursday, and sharing on Friday. The article states that the majority of teachers continued this writing workshop even after the two weeks and that teachers noticed a visible improvement in fluency of writing after the first two weeks.

Maxwell (1994) eamined a special writing workshop that took place once a week during lunch time. The "Lunch Bunch Writing Club", as it was called, took place every Wednesday at lunch, during which time parents of the students and adult volunteers were welcome to come and join the students while they worked. Each student had their own writing area where they would take their parent or another adult to work with them. The students were given half an hour to write, after which the final fifteen minutes were granted to students to share their work. Lunch would follow after this, and the parents and adult volunteers were welcome to bring a lunch and eat it with the students. Maxwell found that after the first few weeks, parents and volunteers became more familiar with the structure of the workshop and became more involved and engaged in the project, and that the students benefitted from having them there.

Abbott and Greenwood (2001) studied the impact that the writing workshop structure had on a special education student named Adam. The writing workshop was conducted twice, once with a high range group of students, and once with a low range (the group to which Adam belonged). Both workshops had the same process of prewriting, drafting, editing, peer conferencing, revision and publishing, and this routine was carried out every day for nine weeks. The class would start with a mini-lesson for about seven to ten minutes, followed by the students writing for thirty minutes, but

failed to indicate a time allotment for the remaining steps. The researchers found that the six step process allowed students of different developmental levels to work at their own pace without holding back the other students. Students were also supplied with graphic organizers if they needed them, which Adam did use. By the end of the nine weeks, researchers found that there was an improvement in writing from both groups, but that the improvement was more noticeable with the low range students. They concluded that the use of the graphic organizers with the low range students helped this improvement.

Gobin (2009) looked into the reduction of stress and anxiety via the writing workshop. She ran her writing workshop in a fourth grade classroom, and began each class with a mini-lesson. The students would begin to write from there, and were given the freedom to choose their topics. She also recommends that teachers attempt at becoming writers along with the students, and that when teaching the class editing, it is best to use work that you've written. That way, your students "feel important in the process. In addition, they understand that writing does not have to be perfect the first time" (Gobin, 2009, p.30). She also points out that the use of portfolios as an end product of the writing workshop will cause students additional stress, and that they may focus on getting the assignment finished rather than the writing itself. She explains that the writing workshop is something that can be changed to work for you, and that you have the freedom to make it work.

Brown (2010) studied a kindergarten writing workshop of twenty-nine students, and explained the importance of having mini-lessons while giving students the freedom of writing. Brown explains that "the workshop approach allows children blocks of time to write, focusing not on a finished product, but rather on the act of writing itself," and that children should not feel pressured to have their piece of writing finished by the end of the day (Brown, 2010, p.25). Brown also found that books and reading were instrumental in the development and process of the writing workshop.

Hoewisch (2001) utilized a writing workshop centered on fairy tales, and wanted to determine how students could take the form of writing and make it their own. The workshop was twelve weeks in length and was conducted in a third grade classroom twice a week for seventy-five minutes per session. Students were introduced to three or four fairy tales during the first week of the writing workshop. During this time, students were involved in brainstorming and pre-writing sessions. After the first week, the workshop would begin with a mini-lesson, while the rest of the time was dedicated to writing, sharing and receiving feedback. The students were encouraged to select their own topics and work with them as they liked. The teacher didn't always agree with what the students included in their stories, but researchers felt that contradicting them would be counterproductive to their research. By the end of week eight, students had developed their rough drafts and moved into editing and conferencing. By the end of week fifteen, students had completed their stories and shared them with the class. The research concluded by saying that the writing of children can be positively influenced through the teacher respecting the identity of the individual writer, and by presenting positive and constructive feedback that demonstrates this approach.

The final study we located was conducted by Hachem, Nabhani & Bahous (2008). Their writing workshop was situated in a grade two classroom and was conducted four days a week for one month, with each session being one hour. The writing workshop followed the same routine every day, beginning with a mini-lesson and followed by independent writing time and conferencing with other students. The researchers also emphasized to the students that it was okay for them to make spelling mistakes and other errors, and that the focus was for them to try their best. Students were allowed to move around within the classroom and were allowed to write about whatever they wanted. Researchers found this to be instrumental in the success of the workshop, because "students had the chance to take risks in their writing and learn that writing was much more than correct spelling and being neat" (Hachem et al., 2008, p.331). The study also found that the writing workshop structure allowed for the proper differentiation of writing instruction. When students were aware of the routine and knew what to do without little to no instruction, the teacher was free to help and support the other students who required it. The researchers concluded by saying that not only did the writing workshop

help to support students in their writing, but recommended the use of the writing workshop in classrooms for its ability to differentiate writing instruction successfully.

There are some common points, such as allowing the students to choose their topics and having a structure and pattern to the writing workshop. These common points will be used to compare the similarities and differences between the writing workshops and the YWP.

Out of these writing workshops, three important topics came to light. First, the child's identity as a writer that would inevitably develop as being part of a writing workshop, since it had been previously suggested in the literature. The second was that while the workshops didn't seem to encourage a time limit or rush on writing, the YWP does. As a result of all of the positive writing about allowing students to pace themselves, two articles were located that encourage speed writing. The third was in consideration of the students who might not want to write a novel as their one large piece of writing for the month. As a modification of that (which is always important to have for writing workshops), we studied two alternatives that students are able to consider as substitutes to the novel they are expected to write.

The identity of the writer in the writer's workshop is an inevitability among students who spend anywhere from two to five times a week writing. Not only that, but students are often writing works that matter to them, and that in turn makes them feel like writers. This is unanimously expressed as a positive thing in the three articles that exclusively examine the identity of the writer, either as something to be achieved, or as a by-product of the workshop.

Lensmire and Satanovsky (1998) focus on the freedom and self-expression that children experience in the writing workshop, and how that, in turn, drives their desire to be identified as and become writers. He explains how lived experiences of a student provide something to write about, and the freedom to do that has the greatest impact on them developing their writing identities.

Graham (1999) began by determining what the definition of a writer was with his students, and whether or not a common identity could be derived from all of their ideas and definitions. The students saw the writer as "someone essentially different (a little eccentric perhaps) who possesses a depth of passion and a level of skill that sets this individual aside from the general population" (Graham, 1999, p.361). Throughout the article the students begin writing themselves, and by the end, they have changed their opinion. They consider writing to be a discipline and a writer as someone who has willpower and persists. As a result of their hard work, many of them considered themselves to be writers at the end.

The article by Baker (2005) is a response to the previously mentioned book The Writing Workshop: Writing Through the Hard Parts (and they're all hard parts). His article specifically focuses on the importance of the writing identity that develops in students who participate in writing workshops. He states that both teachers and students need to think of themselves as writers, and finds that the writing workshop isn't about creating something: it is about developing confidence in their writing and their identities as writers. They need to develop confidence in what they write and what they want to write, and not pay attention to what they think someone else will like or want to read. When they write what they want and they enjoy what they write, their confidence will grow and their identity will flourish.

According to the articles by Simmons (2009) and Staples (2005), there is something good to be said about writing under pressure and time constraints. Simmons points out that, while it isn't as important as proper spelling and grammar, writing under pressure is an important life skill. He goes on to give several everyday examples, e.g. how someone from the community might be approached by another member to write a short speech. Staples (2005) agrees and further develops the idea, saying that anyone going into the corporate business world needs to be trained in the skill of pressure writing. He points out that with how fast the world is moving, on demand e-mails and reports are becoming more common and without time to write and re-write everything. They both conclude by

saying that more time needs to be spent on writing instruction in the class, and that the constant development of the skill might eventually lend itself to expertise and speed.

The final two articles were selected because they are accepted by the YWP as being accepted as forms of writing that can be substituted for stereotypical, imagined form of the novel. An article by Crilly (2009) details how students who enjoy both writing and illustrating can create a graphic novel, and explains how the basics of storytelling are still maintained in the move from mainstream novel to graphic novel. Dialogue, characters and building conflict are three important aspects that remain important regardless of which form you're writing, and allows for modification for the students who have an equal love of illustrating and writing.

The other article by Burns and Webber (2009) offers fanfiction as a substitute for students who have a difficulty coming up with their own characters. The basis of fanfiction is that students use characters created by other people, but write their own unique story. The example the article gives, titled "When Harry Met Bella" sets up a scenario in which Bella Swan (of the famous Twilight books) is transferred to Harry Potter's school, Hogwarts. Students would be allowed to use the characters but create their own unique situations. The authors believe that this strategy may free some writers from the pressure of having to create their own characters: "Creating original, believable characters can be the toughest part of writing" while using characters that already exist will let students "concentrate on other areas of writing, such as pacing, style, and plot" (Burns & Webber, 2009, p.29). Students may be relieved to find that this is an acceptable form of fiction for the YWP challenge.

The Young Writers Program

We will now observe the mechanics of the Young Writers Program and what it has to offer us as educators. We will begin with a scenario. Mr. M has heard some information about the YWP and decides that it is something worth looking into. He wants to get some more information on the YWP, so he goes to the website. The Young Writers Program website (http://ywp.nanowrimo.org/) is the focal point of the entire program. Anything you need, either as a teacher or as a student, can be found on this site. Whether it is updating word counts, trying to come up with an idea or needing a lesson plan, everything can be found on the website. In looking for a place to start learning about the YWP, Mr. M would most likely come to the Educators page (http://ywp.nanowrimo.org/educators). This page presents all of the benefits and support that the YWP has to offer on one page, and is the key to understanding how the YWP works for the classroom. Below are the key features that the YWP has to offer.

Lesson Plans

The curriculum has a monumental impact on what educators do in the classroom. If we have an activity to do but can't find a way to tie it into the curriculum, it is dropped more often than not. This is a universal concern, and explains why the OLL (Office of Letters and Light, the non-profit organization that founded the YWP) have taken steps to ensure that teachers can connect the YWP to the curriculum. The curriculum is divided into four sections: Lower Elementary School (K-2), Upper Elementary School (3-5), Middle School and High School. Mr. M is a grade four teacher, so he clicks on the "Upper Elementary School" link.

From there, Mr. M is taken to a list of lesson plans about the important aspects of novel writing, such as creating characters and villains, and elements of story, plot and setting. Also on this page are two introductory posts. The first introductory post includes a chart and explains how YWP lesson plans have been adapted to the Common Core Standards, a curriculum that has been adapted by 37 different states (http://ywp.nanowrimo.org/ue_fulfillments). The other introductory post tells Mr. M what he has to look forward to in the program, and how it will improve the literacy of his young students.

Curious about the format of the lesson plans, Mr. M clicks on the fourth lesson plan, "Creating Main Characters". The lesson plan is very thorough, beginning with what Common Core Standards are being fulfilled in the lesson. It also includes the lesson time, objective, materials

needed, and the procedure, including discussion questions to ask the students at each step. It also includes accommodations that can be made for students who may read or write at a lower level. As a final note, it also includes worksheets that can easily be printed off or photocopied and used in the lesson. The worksheets for all of the lessons have also been assembled into a workbook, which allows you to download them all at once rather than one at a time.

Virtual Classroom

Mr. M decides that he would like to try and run the YWP in his classroom after all. He registers and is given the opportunity to create a virtual classroom. The virtual classroom allows Mr. M to create a classroom where he can post encouraging words for his students, create a list of important links, create a calendar of upcoming events, and monitor all of his students' word counts at once. At first Mr. M is hesitant, but reads that the name of the classroom doesn't have to include the name of the school or the grade. The classroom can remain anonymous and his students will have usernames that can protect their identities. No one will know except him. He sets up the virtual classroom and uses it to encourage his students and track their progress.

Classroom Novel Kit

Two weeks later in the mail, Mr. M receives a package from the YWP. Inside he finds a very witty and welcoming letter from organizer Chris Angotti, who is happy to hear that another classroom kit has been delivered. He says how he wishes he could have delivered it personally with a handshake, and goes on to explain the contents of the novel kit and how they are to be used.

1. Novel Progress Poster: This is a poster designed to serve as a visual incentive in the classroom, to be hung up and used to chart the progress of students as they write towards their goals.
2. Stickers: Each student gets a sheet. These individual letter stickers form the word "NANOWRIMO". The more progress a student makes towards their word goal, the more letters they use. Once they've reached the goal, the word "Nanowrimo" should be spelled out next to their name on the chart. There are also Nanowrimo logo stickers that are included for each student.
3. Buttons: There is a novelist button for each student. While you can give them to your students as incentive, Chris Angotti recommends attaching them to the chart, giving your students something visible and physical to work towards.

Teacher's Lounge (Forum)

The Teacher's Lounge is the name of the forum on the YWP site. If Mr. M has any questions, or is looking for ideas from other teachers, this is the place that he wants to come to. The Teacher's Lounge is divided into four boards for easy navigation. "Teachers-Only NaNo News" is the board that Chris Angotti uses to post any news and concerns that come across the boards. "Lesson Plans" is for teachers that want to share their own personal lesson plans, which can be especially useful if your curriculum doesn't follow the Common Core Standards that the YWP is designed for. "Beyond Curriculum" looks at how to keep your students inspired, and what to do for those students who might need that extra bit of encouragement or planning. Finally, the "Counselor's Office" is the troubleshooting board. Any teachers that are having difficulty reaching their students, staying organized or staying inspired is welcome to vent and find help here.

One of the most important things about undertaking a writing workshop is to know that you're not alone, and that help is available if you need it. The YWP takes that into account, and has created the forums for that reason: so you can reach out and talk to other teachers who are attempting to undertake the same challenge as you. There is only one word of warning: every October, the boards are cleaned out and erased to make room for the new year of discussions. The four boards stay the same, but the content is wiped clean every year.

Young Writers Resources

Finally, the last section of the website focuses on the students themselves. The forums have a special section of the board just for the students where they can talk to one another across classes and inspire, encourage or help critique characters, ideas, or shared passages from their works. There are

also smaller technology-oriented incentives for the students, such as web badges that they can save and use on their own personal computers. These all pale in comparison to the best resource on the site for young writers: the pep talks.

Every year, the organizers of NaNoWriMo and the YWP ask famous adult, young adult, and children's writers to volunteer and write "pep talks" – a letter to the writers that encourages them to keep writing, and lets them know that they are not alone. All of the authors admit to having trouble writing themselves, and that the difficulty is what makes the challenge. A pep talk is delivered to every participant once a week for the entire month, and always has some encouraging and inspiring words, written from one writer to another. Past pep talk writers for the YWP include Gordon Korman, Jerry Spinelli, and Lemony Snicket. Past pep talk writers for NaNoWriMo include Sue Grafton, Neil Gaiman, Brian Jacques and Piers Anthony.

Certificates and Publishing

Mr. M completes the month. Although not all of his students succeed in achieving their word goals, there is a surprising number who do. Everyone tried their best to reach their goal. As a result of both their successes and their attempts, the YWP sends two blank certificates to Mr. M, one for winners and the other for participants. Both certificates are almost identical, and their development allows Mr. M to print off as many as he would like and fill out the names by hand, or type them in individually using the editable PDF file that has been included.

The students have also discovered that every winner is given a free printed copy of their novel through one of the affiliated sites that is sponsoring the YWP. All they have to do is submit their copy of the story online, and they will receive a free printed proof copy of their manuscript. The winners are excited and want to know more. Some of the other students want to know if they will be running the program again next year. Overall, Mr. M thought the experience was interesting.

As it has been demonstrated, the creation of the YWP has been well designed to consider and support the teachers and students involved. In terms of its development, it is evident that a considerable amount of planning and thought has gone into its construction, from linking it to the curriculum to providing the moral and technical support needed to undertake such a venture. The question now is, how does it measure up when compared to other, successful, writing workshops?

Discussion

While the YWP looks as though it could be beneficial in the classroom, there is cause for hesitation. The YWP is the latest addition to a growing field of writing workshops that are recommended to be included in classrooms around the world. As a result of this, we must view the YWP through a critical framework. To do this, we must look at other writing workshops and observe how they are organized, what grade they are for, and whether or not the YWP shares any common traits with recommended writing workshop procedures.

Twenty different writing workshops, varying in time and age range, were studied and compared for points that were common to all of them. These were then compared to the YWP. The result was that the YWP had a number of these common points, but not all. Like many of the other workshops, the YWP:
1. Allowed students to choose their own topics
2. Encouraged the development of story rather than spelling.

Something that the YWP does not have and need to improve on is:
1. A structure applicable to any or all teachers

Each of these will be evaluated and compared in turn with the writing workshop research.

Students are allowed to choose their own topics

The YWP encourages teachers to allow students to choose their own topics and let the students write about what inspires them. Although some teachers may feel that this is the equivalent of losing some control over the student's writing, the YWP is on the right track. Twelve out of the twenty workshops explicitly instruct teachers to let go of controlling what the students write and just let them choose. Ray & Laminack (2001) say that one of the most important aspects of the writing workshop is giving the students choice. They state that

> By definition, writing is about having something to say, and it is the writer's right to decide what this will be, to decide what he or she wants to say. As teachers we really do not have the right to make this decision for students. We will ask students to do their best to write well in our own workshops, so they need to have good reasons of their own to *need* to write well. At the very heart of needing to write well is personal topic selection." (Ray & Laminack, 2001, p.7)

We need to give students a reason to want to write, and the best way to do that is to let them choose what they want to write about. Shaw (2001), whose first-year Yale writing workshop can be applied to elementary and secondary classes, finds choice to be one of the seven most important traits to have in a writing workshop. Johnson (2001) did a study of three teachers, each of them allowing their students to choose their topics. One teacher noticed "a better quality of writing", another noticed that she didn't "have to pull writing" from her students, and the third found that when the writing "tapped into student's interests and valued their ideas" that she had fewer classroom management issues (Johnson, 2001, p.5). Students are not only more engaged, but are less likely to become distracted and lose focus.

Having the writing workshop in the classroom also resulted in students having higher self-confidence, both in themselves and in their writing. Everyone who encouraged students to choose their own topics made this observation. Students began to consider themselves as writers, and began to take value in their writing. Boiarsky (1981) noted that students were "beginning to write what they think, not what they think the teacher wants" (Boiarsky, 1981, p.464). Some students enjoyed writing workshop and their identities as writers so much that they asked their teacher if she could extend the writing workshop period (Jasmine & Weiner, 2007). One study noted that parents found some of their students writing more regularly at home (Conroy, Marchand & Webster, 2009). When students enjoy writing, they begin to feel less like students are more like writers. Baker (2005) says that this is one of the driving forces behind the writing workshop for students, about "feeling like a writer and thinking like a writer... because what you have to say *is* important" (Baker, 2005, p.351). When students have that power and drive, they enjoy the process more and more.

Of course, not all students had an idea and immediately started writing. Some students had difficulty with the challenge of coming up with a story and characters. One study provided students with visual cues such as pictures to help inspire writing topics (Peyton et al., 1994). Other teachers used graphic organizers to help the students come up with different kinds of ideas (James, 2001). The importance is that the students come up with the ideas themselves. Of course, the teachers won't always agree with the selections that the students make. In Hoewisch, 2001, a teacher was confronted with a problem when her students were working on fairy tales and a young girl in her class wanted a rap singer in her story instead of a princess. Other children wanted to make similar changes. The teacher and her associates wanted the children to change them back, but felt that the students "might begin to feel that we were simply criticizing their experiences and interests" rather than giving them the freedom to write that had been promised (Hoewisch, 2001, p.271). The fine line that needs to be considered here is why that child should be told to change his or her topic. Try to evaluate why the student made the choice to write that and whether or not your intervention is being done to improve the child's work or make yourself feel better and safer. Sometimes it is better off to give the child the freedom and let him or her write. As Lensmire and Satanovsky note, "When children are granted such freedom, they are able to experience the elasticity of the frames within which they write" which helps to "transform them, if only in small ways" (Lensmire & Satanovsky, 1998, p.281). Some of those small ways, from what we've seen, include confidence, self-assurance, and enjoyment.

Encourage the development of story rather than spelling

It is one thing to say that you're going to attempt to write a novel in a month, but it is something completely different to actually do it. Anyone can feel daunted by such a challenge, and students are no different. Some students have an idea in the head that everything has to be perfect in one draft or one attempt. This anxiety can easily be amplified when working on a novel. Because it is one long piece of writing, you can have a sudden turn of events in a matter of paragraphs. Students need to know that they should just go with the flow. Paying attention to story rather than spelling or grammar can help achieve this.

Ray and Laminack (2001) describe the situation best. They say that when teachers are getting their students to write in a workshop, their belief is the same as the YWP: it is all about quantity. But the authors explain that the reason to support quantity over quality is that you want to "have students spend lots and lots of time writing, knowing that not all of it will be so great, than spending just a little time writing and getting everything perfect." (Ray & Laminack, 2001, p.10). The best way for students to get better is to write and just keep writing. Hachem et al. (2008) agree, and feel that students would take more chances in their writing if they knew what they wrote meant much more than proper spelling and grammar. Jones, Reutzel and Fargo recommend invented spelling, in which the student makes an educated guess on how to spell the word by sounding it out and moving on (Jones et al., 2010). This technique is also recommended by Schwartz, who says that having to look up a word or focus on the correct spelling disrupts the flow of writing (Schwartz, 1987). Errors are little more than learning mistakes, and can always be corrected in editing later. The important thing is to try.

There needs to be structure in a writing workshop.

As it stands now, the YWP has no visible structure. Take for example the lesson plans that the YWP has developed. Although the program has taken special steps to prepare lesson plans and make them applicable to the writing curriculum, they do very little else. What kind of learning abilities are they designed for? Should teachers be setting aside an hour of class a day for each of the eighteen lessons? How many times a week should the lessons be taught? The topics that the lessons cover are instrumental to the development of the novel. Wouldn't it be beneficial to teach them *before* the month of writing? Questions like these are what could lead a teacher to forget attempting the entire endeavour of implementing the YWP in the classroom. There is no structure.

While it can be implied that the structure is completely up to the teacher, this is not enough. Eighteen out of the twenty writing workshops had some kind of schedule set up. Fourteen of them felt that every writing workshop period should begin with a mini-lesson of five to ten minutes. That is a considerable commonality among writing workshops, and should definitely be included for anyone intending to attempt any kind of writing workshop in their classroom. The YWP is no exception. There needs to be some kind of structure, and the YWP makes no recommendations of how exactly to bring it into the classroom.

Ray and Laminack (2001) write that the writing workshop must be highly structured. The workshop approach must follow the same pattern daily so that it could almost run itself independent of directed activity. Students should know what they are doing and what is expected of them from the moment the writing workshop begins to the moment it ends. It supports them and helps give them focus and direction. It also helps the teacher to spend more time with students of different writing abilities. Hachem et al. (2008) state that "the principle advantage of the writing workshop is its structure, which allows for individualised instruction" while also allowing "students the chance to progress at their own rates" (Hachem et al, 2008, p.332). When students know the routine and can follow it with little to no guidance and supervision, the teacher is free to help other students in the classroom who might need the extra assistance.

What kind of structure best suits the writing workshop? Peyton et al. (1994) define the writing workshop as "regular and predictable blocks of time" in which "teachers begin with a mini-lesson,

followed by periods of drafting, conferencing, sharing, revising, redrafting, editing, publishing and celebrating' (Peyton et al., 1994, p.472). There is no sign of editing or revision anywhere in the program, and while the attitude of NaNoWriMo is 'December is for editing, November is for writing', trying to write and then edit two large bodies of work in two separate months is not a realistic goal to have in the classroom. The lessons that the YWP provides are anywhere from fifty to sixty minutes in length, after which time the students are expected to complete their writing. This does not a realistic amount of time to spend. The beauty of the mini-lesson is that it is short. Most studies found that students began to enjoy working on their writing. Having anything longer than a mini-lesson is preventing the students from doing what they really want to do: write. As such, the YWP should take a lesson from other writing workshops that have more reasonable structures, and more successful results.

Conclusion

We liken the YWP to completing a recipe: you have all of the ingredients and materials, and you know what the final product is supposed to look like, but you don't know what to mix together, what to bake or broil, or the time it will take to complete any and all of the steps. The YWP has a great amount of potential and its foundation is sound, but at this stage it lacks the structure with which to implement it. The YWP has support for every aspect of the program except how it should be executed in the classroom. While it is good to give teachers the flexibility to work with the program as they see fit, having no structure at all does more harm than good. A general workshop structure needs to be developed for the program, and from there teachers can add or subtract or make modifications as needed.

What would also benefit the adoption of the YWP would be the development of modifications for the different learning abilities that are present in the classroom. Although the workbooks can be provided as a supplement to visual learners, there is no indication or suggestion of how to encourage the other learning abilities that could be present in the classroom. Once the YWP develops a substantial structure that can be implicated in the classroom, they will then have the opportunity to make modifications for the different types of learners that the YWP could come in contact with. A successful writing workshop, as it has been mentioned before, has the capacity to be beneficial to all types of learning abilities. As it is presented now, the YWP does not have those kinds of benefits. They have recently attempted to present a Spanish version of the workbook for those classes that needed it, but had to pull it due to errors in its construction. The YWP is taking steps towards considering all kinds of learners and languages, but it is far from achieving the kinds of success that can and should be present in the classes that implement it.

We recommend that any teacher attempting to implement the YWP must first tie it to the curriculum of that grade level. Second, they must develop the concept of the YWP into a workshop format that the students can follow and adapt into a routine, since a large part of their becoming writers relies on their independence at following the structured format. For someone attempting a writing workshop in the classroom for the first time, the YWP provides an excellent idea of how to begin a writing workshop and a month is a good place to start. With the right structure, there is no reason why the YWP can't be a beneficial tool to have in the classroom, no matter what grade level.

Recommendations for Future Research
An excellent place to start would be to find a teacher willing to try and develop a writing workshop that combines the YWP with a more realistic and successful and tested writing workshop framework. Once that has been developed, it would be worth seeing how it is carried out in the classroom, and what the successes and pitfalls of that implementation are. For example, the YWP is very technology-oriented. Is there a way to achieve the same level of success without it? Not all schools have the same levels of technology. Does it have the same benefits with or without the technological advantage?

Since the YWP focuses on students writing one novel for the entire month, it would be worth researching whether or not it is more beneficial for students to work on one single piece of writing for a month, or to work on a series of different, but related, pieces instead. Fanfiction and graphic novel in place of the expected novel can be substituted in, but those are both still single pieces of writing. It would be worth researching whether or not working on only one piece of writing would either help or hinder the development of the student as a writer.

The question that relates to this is in terms of the length of the YWP. Students have thirty days to write. Is this enough time for students to develop writing skills? Should you run the program multiple times in the school year, maybe once per term? The long term and short term benefits of a writing workshop in relation to how often and how long it is run is worth looking into.

The final recommendation for further research is in the construction of the YWP itself. The lesson plans and advantages of the YWP being tied to the curriculum are for those teachers whose curriculum is tied to the Common Core Standards, popular in the United States. Can the YWP be developed for other classrooms around the world as well? Could it be as successful? Is it worth re-designing to suit other countries? Perhaps if the developers of the YWP could find a way to adapt the lesson plans to other countries and curriculums, teachers would be more willing to implement it in their classroom.

References

Baker, W. D. (2005). "Layers and layers" of teaching writers' workshop: A response to Katie Wood Ray's "The Writing Workshop." *Pedagogy, 5*(2), 348-352.

Bayer, R. A. (1999, May). The effects of a first grader's participation in a writer's workshop on their ability to become more confident and more descriptive writers. Master's Research Project, Kean University

Boiarsky, C. (1981). Learning to write by writing. *Educational Leadership, 38*(6), 463-464.

Brown, K. (2010). Young authors: Writing workshop in kindergarten. *Young Children, 65*(1), 24-28.

Burns, E., & Webber, C. (2009). When Harry met Bella. *School Library Journal, 55*(8), 26-29.

Conroy, M., Marchand, T., & Webster, M. (2009, May). Motivating primary students to write using writer's workshop. An Action Research Project Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Saint Xavier University

Crilley, M. (2009). Getting students to write using comics. *Teacher Librarian, 37*(1), 28-31.

Enns, C., Hall, R., Isaac, B., & MacDonald, P. (2007). Process and product: creating stories with deaf students. *TESL Canada Journal, 25*(1), 1-22.

Fu, D., & Lamme, L. (2002). Assessment through conversation. *Language Arts, 79*(3), 241-250.

Gobin, J. (2009, Winter). Successful and less stressful: improving writing instruction in the elementary grades. *Kentucky English Bulletin*, 29-31.

Graham, R. (1999). The self as writer: assumptions and identities in the writing workshop. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 43*(4), 358-364.

Hachem, A., Nabhani, M., & Bahous, R. (2008). 'We can write!' The writing workshop for young learners. *Education, 36*(4), 325-337.

Hoewisch, A. (2001). "Do I have to have a princess in my story?": Supporting children's writing of fairy tales. *Reading & Writing Quarterly, 17*(4), 249-277.

James, L. A., Abbott, M., & Greenwood, C. (2001). How Adam became a writer: winning writing strategies for low-achieving students. *Teaching Exceptional Children, 33*(3), 30-37.

Jasmine, J., & Weiner, W. (2007). The effects of the writing workshop on abilities of first grade students to become confident. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 35*(2), 131-139.

Johnson, A. P. (2001, June). Writing workshop and beginning teachers. Reports - Research

Jones, C., Reutzel, R., & Fargo, J. (2010). Comparing two methods of writing instruction: effects on kindergarten students' reading skills. *The Journal of Educational Research, 103*(5), 327-341.

Kazemek, F., & Logas, B. (2000). Spiders, kid curlers, and white shoes: Telling and writing stories across generations. *The Reading Teacher, 53*(6), 446-451.

Lensmire, T. (1994, April). Writing workshop as carnival: reflections on an alternative learning environment. Additional information about the document that does not fit in any of the other fields; not used after 2004. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association

Lensmire, T., & Satanovsky, L. (1998). Defense of the romantic poet? Writing workshops and voice. *Theory into Practice, 37*(4), 280-288.

Maxwell, L. (1994). The lunch bunch writing club. *Teaching Pre K-8, 25*(1), 98-100.

Miller, M., & Higgins, B. (2008). Beyond test preparation: Nurturing successful learners through reading and writing workshops. *Kappa Delta Pi Record, 44*(3), 124-127.

NaNoWriMo Young Writers Program. (2010). Retrieved November 2, 2010, from Office of Letters and Light website: http://ywp.nanowrimo.org/

Peyton, J., Jones, C., Vincent, A., & Greenblatt, L. (1994). Implementing writing workshop with ESOL students: visions and realities. *TESOL Quarterly, 28*(3), 469-487.

Pollington, M., Wilcox, B., & Morrison, T. (2001). Self-perception in writing: The effects of writing workshop and traditional instruction on intermediate grade students. *Reading Psychology, 22*(4), 249-265.

Ray, K., & Laminack, L. (2001). *The Writing Workshop: Working Through the Hard Parts (And They're All Hard Parts).* Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Resources for Educators | NaNoWriMo Young Writers Program. (2010). Retrieved November 5, 2010, from Office of Letters and Light website: http://ywp.nanowrimo.org/educators

Schwartz, S. (1987). *All Write!: A Teacher's Guide to Writing, Grades K to 6*. Toronto, ON: OISE Press.

Shaw, D. (2001). Sailing the seven C's of writers' workshop. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 45*(4), 322-324.

Simmons, J. (2009). A Conflict Revisited. *The High School Journal, 93*(1), 38-42.

Upper Elementary School Common Core Fulfillments | NaNoWriMo Young Writers Program. (2010). Retrieved November 5, 2010, from Office of Letters and Light website: http://ywp.nanowrimo.org/ue_fulfillments