



## Students as Writers and Composers: Workshopping in the Digital Age

*Troy Hicks and Franki Sibberson*

Writing workshop is a mainstay in many language arts classrooms. On any given day in classrooms across the country, children read as writers, enjoying the play of language and the pleasure of reading, but also digging into mentor texts to analyze how authors use words to convey ideas, communicate information, and construct narratives. They work deeply in their own writing notebooks—drafting, revising, conferring with peers and teachers about their thinking and practices as writers. This authoring is most often pencil to paper work, but what happens when other communication tools are added to the writing curriculum? What kinds of class structures are needed if students are to be supported in becoming the kinds of authors who work in digital environments? What teaching and learning practices could guide students to consider themselves multimodal text-makers who combine words, images, sounds, and gestures? In other words, what happens if we think of writing workshop as a structure for supporting students as *composers*?

For this issue of *Language Arts*, we invited two educators who actively integrate technology into their language arts teaching, as well as into their work in teacher professional development. Dr. Troy Hicks is an associate professor of English at Central Michigan University and focuses his work on the teaching of writing, literacy and technology, and teacher education and professional development. A former middle school teacher, he collaborates with K–12 colleagues and explores how they implement newer literacies in their classrooms. Dr. Hicks directs CMU’s Chippewa River Writing

Project, a site of the National Writing Project, and he frequently conducts professional development workshops related to writing and technology. He is the author of the Heinemann titles *Crafting Digital Writing* (2013) and *The Digital Writing Workshop* (2009), as well as a coauthor of *Because Digital Writing Matters* (Jossey-Bass, 2010) and *Create, Compose, Connect!* (Routledge/Eye on Education, 2014). In addition, he has authored numerous journal articles and book chapters. He blogs at Digital Writing, Digital Teaching (<http://hickstro.org/>).

Franki Sibberson is a 3rd-grade teacher in Dublin, Ohio. For over 25 years, she has worked in elementary schools as a classroom teacher, a Reading Support Teacher, a Curriculum Support Teacher, and a school librarian. With coauthor Karen Szymusiak, she has written books and created videos on teaching reading in the intermediate grades. Ms. Sibberson’s books include *Beyond Leveled Books* (Stenhouse), *Still Learning to Read* (Stenhouse), *Day-to-Day Assessment in the Reading Workshop* (Scholastic), and *The Joy of Planning* (Choice Literacy). She blogs regularly at A Year of Reading ([readingyear.blogspot.com](http://readingyear.blogspot.com)), and she is also a regular contributor to Choice Literacy (<https://www.choiceliteracy.com/>). She recently completed a term as Elementary Representative-at-Large on the Executive Board of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE).

**This excerpted conversation was recorded on May 22, 2014, and has been edited for publication. The full conversation is available as a podcast at <http://www.ncte.org/journals/la/podcasts>.**

**LA:** Digital technology has had a tremendous effect on how we think about teaching writing and cultivating students as writers in the 21st century. How did the two of you start to work together as educators around this shift?



And then I think we got connected through NCTE and our work there on a couple projects, and we've continued the conversation over several years.

**Franki:** I read Troy's work and really started thinking about writing workshop and listening to what the National Writing Project was saying.

And then I think we got connected through NCTE and our work there on a



couple projects, and we've continued the conversation over several years.

**Troy:** Right. Franki was very generous and invited me to speak at their Dublin Literacy Conference a few winters ago, and that was a really great opportunity to get to know her and some of her colleagues in Ohio a little bit better. And since

then we've maintained conversations on Twitter and through email and Google hangouts and other kinds of writing.

**LA:** Could you talk a little bit about how you think digital technologies have impacted reading and writing workshop?

**Franki:** I'm teaching third grade right now. There are some days that I look out at my reading workshop, and it looks exactly the same as it always did: kids lying around reading, writing. It feels the same—that same authentic feel. Then there are other days when the technology has added so much that is different that although the look from afar is similar, when you really look at how much choice kids have and the possibilities they have because of digital tools, it seems like everything has changed. They have choice in so many areas now that they didn't 10 years ago. So for me, knowing the digital tools and what's possible for kids has totally impacted both reading and writing workshops, yet it still feels authentic. A lot's still the same, but so much has opened up for even the youngest kids because of the digital tools.

**Troy:** I'd like to follow up on Franki's idea of choice because I'm really curious to hear how all those choices play out in her classroom. There are choices in genre, audience, and purposes for reading and writing. There are increased choices in the ways that you find and respond to text. There are different ways that you can plan for mini-lessons and confer with students. So I wonder if she could talk a little more about some of those choices that the technology allows.

**Franki:** It's really funny. The first year or two that I played around with digital technology in workshops, I'd have kids reading on Kindles, or they'd be writing blogs, but it was all independent work. Then I realized that all my mini-lessons still used pretty traditional texts and pretty traditional mentors. I also realized that in my conferring, I rarely brought up those things that they were doing that were digital. So all of a sudden, like you mentioned, I'm much more intentional about all the possible mentors we can use that are not the traditional picturebooks or newspaper articles. That's opened things up in terms of conferring and valuing what kids are reading digitally. At first it was *allowed*, but I wasn't talking about it within the workshop.

I feel like now the conversation about audience is much more integrated. We have conversations about what they are writing, I suggest that we look at an informational text, whether it's a video or a picturebook, and we think about the craft the author used. But it took me a couple of years to get to that point. Those choices, like you mentioned, were available throughout the workshop, but they weren't in my mini-lessons. [Laughter]. They weren't as valued as I thought they were until I really looked at where those pieces were missing. So the choices were there for kids, but only in that one piece of the workshop. So I've definitely evolved in that area.

**LA:** Franki, could you talk a bit more about that? You say that it took a couple of years. Was it a gradual change that you saw in how you were conferring with students and bringing in more of the conversation around audience and how that changes in a digital context, or was it sort of an "aha" moment for you?

**Franki:** You know, I feel like it was a little bit of both. I feel like there were things that

would just evolve naturally. A child would be reading something, and so it would come up in a share session. But then there were places where I'd go to a conference, and I'd hear somebody talk about mini-lessons, and I'd say, "Oh! Huh! [Laughter] I'd never thought about that!" And that's where things kind of jumped. For things to become a natural part of the conversation in a classroom, I had to understand them better, and I had to understand what kids were doing with them. So it was a little of both. I evolved naturally, and then I listened really hard to people who were doing things that I wasn't, and then I just jumped in and tried it. So it was a combination. And I think it was a matter of adjusting my comfort level.

I also think that two years make a big difference. There are more kids with digital tools, and there are more eight-year-olds who have Kindles. In fact, there are more eight-year-olds who are blogging on their own. I think the routines are still the same: I'm still planning mini-lessons, I'm still planning small groups, I'm still having share sessions. But as these have evolved, they are much heavier into digital technology now than they were a year ago because digital is embedded throughout the workshop.

**Troy:** I think one of the really smart moves that Franki makes—I saw her present this originally at a conference, and then she was gracious enough to let me turn it into an appendix in *Crafting Digital Writing* (2013)—is to have her students talk intentionally about those choices. They don't just discuss what writers do in terms of what we would traditionally think of as craft—like having a catchy introduction or inserting a quote or having the right word choice—but they also talk about the digital element. What does it mean to use this particular font, or what does it mean to add this transition between my slides or in my movie? By analyzing those pieces of both author's craft and digital craft, she is doing a really wonderful service for her readers and writers; she's helping them think about those digital mentor texts in really smart ways.

**LA:** I want to pick up that question of mentor texts. Mentor texts are such an important part of writing workshop when we talk about author craft, but now as teachers, we're having to think about mentor texts differently and look at

different kinds of mentor texts. So I was wondering if both of you could talk about that: how do you think about mentor texts now? How do you go about finding them? How do you know the mentor texts that you're using have qualities that would be beneficial for your students?

**Troy:** I will preface this quickly, and then I will ask Franki to give an example, but my quick response to that uses the MAPS [mode and media, audience, purpose, situation] heuristic that I discussed in both of my books. Think about the mode in terms of the genre and what you're hoping to have students look at. To use the Common Core language, is it a narrative? Is it informational? Is it an argumentative text? Then think carefully about the media. You could present an argument both through written text on a website or a blog post and as oral text or video text. So you want to help kids understand the modes that are happening in mentor texts.

In terms of actually selecting mentor texts, one piece of advice I would offer is that pretty much anything that catches kids' attention is something worth analyzing. I think that people who have been involved in media literacy for quite some time have been trying to do this with commercial television shows and radio spots and all of that forever. And now for those of us that are teaching more traditional language arts, we think a lot more carefully about those texts as actually worth studying. We also try to listen to what kids are talking about. Are they talking about a particular video or movie trailer? Are they interested in a particular magazine article or format of a particular magazine or something like that? Use those opportunities as they arise. Now there are, of course, plans that you make for careful units of study in particular genres and media, but I also think just capitalizing on kids' natural interests in those texts is important.

**Franki:** I like what you said. I used to have a big binder for storing whatever I found throughout the year that could be a great mentor text. Now I feel like I'm using Pinterest and favoriting Tweets when I see a video or blog post or something that might lend itself to real study with kids who are eight years old. Troy, you mentioned looking at what kids are interested in, and my students are all about those rainbow band bracelets. I wanted them to look closely at

some of those how-to videos on YouTube, so I did all my usual teacher moves on how to study a mentor text. We looked at some other favorites, too. I realized that they knew those videos so much better than I did because they already had a handle on the best people to watch on YouTube for making bracelets and who not to watch. They had studied certain videos as a reader. It was a really different role for me to take on, to just ask them the right questions to determine which craft moves the stronger videos had. They knew those videos so well; they had watched them so many times. I started from scratch like I used to do in my units of study, but they didn't need that. They knew the videos better because, like you said, there was something in them that caught their eye.

So I'm relying on my kids a little bit to identify mentor texts, like you mentioned, Troy. But I'm also realizing that in some cases, they may have watched this video 42 times to make this bracelet. So I'm realizing that they know it really well, and I'm trying to build on that, too. Even at eight years old, they know who they want to follow on YouTube and who does not produce such a good how-to video. They've made those decisions as readers, and it's just a matter of transferring that to "What does that mean for you as a writer, then?"

**Troy:** Just a very quick footnote to that. My sons, who are in third, fourth, and fifth grades right now, were sitting on the couch last night watching YouTube videos on Minecraft. I overheard one little snippet of their conversation where they were saying, "Well, this one's no good. He's not telling us anything about how he did this." So kids have the mental language to talk about some of those choices, and now the trick for me, as a parent who wants to see my kids using Minecraft in an educative and productive manner and also as someone who is interested in digital literacy, is to talk to them about, "Okay, well, how would you make a video for Minecraft?" So, it's very interesting.

**Franki:** Yeah. Minecraft and Rainbow Loom and all those sites are great examples of how there are so many mentor texts out there, but as adults, we don't necessarily happen upon them like the kids do. So I've really been relying on my own children and my students to find those

and bring them to me because I am just not likely to see them.

**LA:** It seems to me that so much of the conversation about writing looks different when you move it into the digital environment, where notions change in terms of questions like "who is the author?" and "what is the text?" But we're also still developing students as print-based writers, as print-based authors. How do you blend those two? Do you find that it's difficult or fairly easy to make those moves from conventional print-based authoring into digital authoring?

**Franki:** I'll start that one. I feel like for me as a third-grade teacher, I'm still dealing with kids who are really struggling with that [print] text piece. Text isn't making total sense to them yet. So I do feel challenged that they need both. And with the current high-stakes testing environment, they definitely need to be able to do print-based writing as well as video writing. One of the things I'm thinking about and trying to balance is blog writing, which is pretty much text-based writing, but it presents lots of digital opportunities and challenges, too, like determining your audience and things like that. I want to make sure that, just as we did before, everything isn't the same kind of writing. Let's say they keep a blog, and then they create a few videos, such as how-to videos, across the year. But at school, we also have a class blog or some shared experiences where we create other things and where we are responding to our reading and annotating using both visual and print. That strikes me as important. I feel like that's what has to happen in third grade, because the text-based stuff isn't in place yet.

Troy and I have often discussed whether it is different in third grade when you are dealing with text-based writing. And I do think that's one of the challenges, especially in elementary school—to make sure that there *is* a balance. For me, it's about time. Is it worth spending three weeks creating a video more than once or twice a year if text is a real issue for that child? How do I make sure that something like blogging is valued? Because that is a little bit more text-based for kids who are still at that stage of literacy. So that is a big challenge. I think we want them to be able to do it all. What does that mean for K–12 education? And how do we balance that?



**Troy:** I really appreciate Franki's response to this. Over the past couple of years, she has helped me think about that balance. I have often said in conference presentations and workshops that I would never want my children to *not* like using a notebook and pens and paper. However, I also want them to be able to think very critically and carefully about the choices they're making as writers, to ask if at some point it makes more sense to compose a video. I use the word "compose" very intentionally there. I'm not talking about just pulling the template off of iMovie and throwing in a few pictures. I'm talking about actually composing your own timeline and thinking about the rhetorical decisions you're making as a digital writer. There are times when composing a video is worth the time and effort because it will have a much broader impact. So I think that what Franki says is important, especially in the context of high-stakes testing and laws that are now potentially holding third graders back if they "can't read" at the end of semester or school year. That's a very real context for a number of teachers and a number of kids. So we have to keep that in mind.

**Franki:** I think one of the reasons it's interesting for me to keep up the conversation with Troy and with other people who work with high school students is because I can see that there are issues in elementary school that make [creating videos] a little less authentic. I don't want my students to create a video and write out a script. That's not what they do. When I create a slide show, I don't write it out before I actually open up the slide show. I usually just create it with the slides open. But I think that's what we tend to fall back on as elementary teachers—we have them draft texts in a traditional form and then read them into videos. I don't think that's necessarily the authentic way that you compose video or that you compose audio.

So now I'm paying attention to what people are doing who are beyond the age of eight and how they do it. In watching my own kids make a YouTube video at home on how to make a rainbow bracelet, I realize they don't write it out on paper first. As a result, I've moved to thinking that a traditional process isn't necessary to compose something nontraditional. They have to figure out a process that works for them. Again,

that challenge of keeping it authentic and still balancing the digital with text-based composing is definitely something that's always in the back of my head with third graders.

**LA:** One of the things that also confounds educators right now is this whole question of assessment of digital composition and digital works. How do you assess these kinds of texts?

**Troy:** That's a question I've definitely been wrestling with since I wrote *The Digital Writing Workshop*. I have always felt like it's forcing a round peg into a square hole. Rubrics don't work well for writing, and they certainly don't work well for digital writing, in and of themselves. So I have been looking at a couple of tools recently. One is the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* [see sidebar], which I used as a way to think about assessment questions for crafting digital writing. Another tool is The National Writing Project's *Multimodal Assessment Project* [see sidebar], which looks at different domains, such as the context of the project and the process that the student went through to create the project.

In a way, I've come right back to where I began as a writing teacher: in digital compositions, we have to assess the process and product. We are fortunate that we now have these tools to do that type of assessment. We can look at embedded comments on Google Docs. We can have a student transfer his or her slides into VoiceThread and put comments on them. We can have students record screencasts at the end of the project, describing what he or she created. And quite frankly, most students have a video camera on the smart phone or the tablet that they're carrying with them, so now they can record those self-reflections, and they can answer those types of questions. So it's fair to say that assessment is moving in some new directions. Of course, this is all under the backdrop of Common Core, Smarter Balance, PARCC—those things are pushing us in unfortunate directions for digital assessment. As teachers, I believe we need to thoughtfully and creatively push back against those types of more limiting assessments.

**Franki:** I think that your work with *The Digital Writing Workshop* helped me wonder if I am really assessing the whole process of what they've come to? I've got lots of kids who

really like yellow or red letters on orange background, but when I talk to them, they're really intentional about that decision. So I have to really think about my bigger goals for young kids: Do they fully understand that writers make intentional decisions? Do they go back and revise? That whole process piece, just like 20 years ago when I started writing workshop, has to be as important if not more important with young children. I have to think about those big ideas that cross all kinds of writing. Are you organizing in a way that makes sense for your audience? Are you thinking about your audience and your purpose? Are you changing things based on feedback or what you want your audience to know? And are all those decisions intentional? I feel like if young kids understand that, they will incorporate that thinking as they build these products in the future. So that process piece and that response piece that you talk about, Troy, is really key. When children first come to school, we need to really get them talking about why they made the decisions they made. In fact, that has been a big part of my assessment this year.

**LA:** Do you have any advice for those teachers who are considering digital writing workshop or who are just beginning to work with it? How about for those who have been doing it for a while and are hitting some snags?

**Franki:** It's going to be messy. I mean, every time I try something new, I come home and say, "This is crazy. I'm not doing this anymore!" [Laughter]. My husband is a technology specialist, so he gets my frustration. The truth is, there are always those days where something is not working—two of my kids this week lost their entire projects. It just gets chaotic in the way writing workshop gets chaotic. It's really easy to just give up and say, "I can't do this." And then the next day, it's always amazing. I think about when I started writing workshop 25 years ago, it felt like that, too. There were days that I thought, "This is crazy! It's a disaster in here!" And then the next day you saw the benefits of that chaos: what kids created and the conversations they were having.

You know, I think you just have to expect that it's not really predictable some days, and it's a process. I'll try something one day and it's

## FOR INQUISITIVE MINDS

### Resources for Implementing Digital Literacy in the Classroom

- Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing

<http://wpacouncil.org/framework>

Developed by the Council of Writing Program Administrators, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the National Writing Project, this site offers a framework for college success, including rhetorical and 21st century skills and habits of mind and experiences. The site also includes a bibliography of sample research and curricular resources.

- The National Writing Project's Multimodal Assessment Project

<http://digitalis.nwp.org/resource/1577>

This site features early work of the National Writing Project's Multimodal Assessment Project Committee (MAP). The committee takes up the question, "So how might our ways of talking about text change if we think about assessment of multimodal texts?"

[http://ccdigitalpress.org/dwae/07\\_nwp.html](http://ccdigitalpress.org/dwae/07_nwp.html)

Written by the Multimodal Assessment Project (MAP) Group, this online book chapter (Chapter 7 of *Digital Writing Assessment and Evaluation*\*) presents five domains—context, artifact, substance, process management and technique,

fabulous, and the next day it's a disaster. That's just the nature of it. I mean, that's true of my own writing. Some days it's great and some days it's a disaster. It's no different for these kids. We just have to understand that some days, it's going to be a little bit messy, and that's okay. That doesn't mean it's not a good day. I just have to remember that every time we have a bad day, I can pretty much count on the next day being fabulous.

**Troy:** I would add a couple of other notes. First, Franki exhibits such a wonderfully positive, proactive stance toward using technology. I admire that, and it leads me to urge our profession to advocate for ourselves. We need to do it in a variety of arenas, but especially in the technology arena. I recognize there's a digital divide, and some schools are more fortunate than others. But whatever your context is, whatever devices you have, or whatever devices students bring into their classrooms through bring-your-own-device programs or whatnot, we have to be thinking more intentionally about the policies and procedures that affect them. For instance, I can think of dozens of times where I was doing

a workshop, and I introduced Google Docs or Wikispaces or Edublogs or whatever the case might be, and the immediate reaction is, "That will never happen in my district because it's blocked." And I want to say, "Who are the people who have fought against censored books? Who are the people who have made all these changes in the way that writing gets taught? We are! So who needs to make all the changes in how technology is implemented? We do!"

There's a great resource out there from The Consortium of School Networking [see sidebar]. It's basically a set of acceptable use policies updated for the mobile Web and Web 2.0. Bud Hunt [see sidebar], among other people, has been making this case for a long time: kids live in a technology-rich world, and they're going to be able to access these tools outside of school. Yes, it's unfortunate that things like cyberbullying and some bad stuff gets on the Internet. Some kids are going to make bad choices and post a naughty word or perhaps find an inappropriate picture. And yet, at the same time, we've also had school buses and locker rooms and cafeterias and playgrounds and other places where unfortunately

and habits of mind—in which multimodal text creators operate and in which teachers can provide feedback and assessment of multimodal or digital works.

[\*McKee, H. A., & DeVoss, D. N. (Eds.). (2013). *Digital writing assessment and evaluation*. Logan, UT: Computers and Composition Digital Press/Utah State University Press. Retrieved from <http://ccdigitalpress.org/dwae.>]

- The Consortium of School Networking

<http://www.cosn.org>

The Consortium of School Networking is a professional organization for K–12 district technology educators. The site offers certification information and educational resources, including the organization's fair use policy guidelines (<http://www.cosn.org/AUPguide>).

- Bud Hunt

<http://budtheteacher.com/blog/about/>

Bud Hunt is an instructional technologist from the St. Vrain Valley School District in northern Colorado. His blog takes up issues surrounding the use of technology in and out of schools, as well as considerations of how students are readers and writers in the digital age.

Bonnie McCarthy  
Georgia State University Doctoral Student

some of those things have happened to kids. So we're not going to help our kids become better digital citizens by putting their heads in the sand. We as teachers need to take a very active stance toward integrating technology in whatever ways we can. And when we get those firewalls—not only technical firewalls that are quite literally put up by the system administrator, but those emotional firewalls—we need to advocate on behalf of our students and make better choices. My piece of advice is that teachers need to think about what they want to do, what they're hoping to accomplish, and then they really need to talk about and advocate for the literacy goals that they have in mind for their students.

**Franki:** That's so smart. I'd add, too, that both of us are pretty committed to being digital writers ourselves and to playing with what's out there. I think just like we kept a notebook 20 years ago, blogging and creating videos and playing with audio recordings and all those things help us better advocate because we understand what it is to be a good digital citizen. So I think the teachers-as-writers stance seems pretty critical.

**LA:** Thank you for sharing your thoughts about how writing—and the teaching of writing—is changing. We appreciate your insights.

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## Call for Emerging Leaders Fellowship Applications

The NCTE Conference on English Leadership invites participation in the Emerging Leaders Fellowship (ELF) for a possible 5th cohort. The ELF program invites individuals in the initial few years of a new or revised leadership assignment at K–university levels to collaborate for leadership support and networking opportunities with a mentor from a community of highly experienced English leaders and scholars. Mentors' own work can be enriched through engagement with new ideas and school contexts.

Fellows and mentors meet during the annual CEL Convention in November and continue their work throughout the following year. Selected fellows and mentors receive complimentary registration for both the 2015 (Minneapolis) and 2016 (Atlanta) CEL conventions. Please check the NCTE/CEL website (<http://www.ncte.org/cel/emergingleaders>) for further information, application requirements, and procedures. **Application Deadline: February 28, 2015.** Fellowships will be announced by the end of May.

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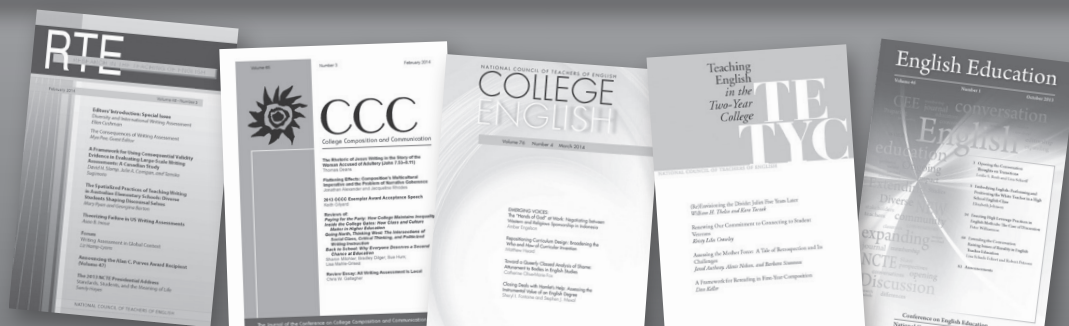
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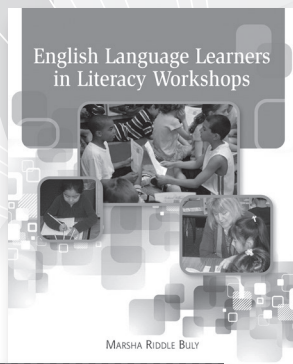
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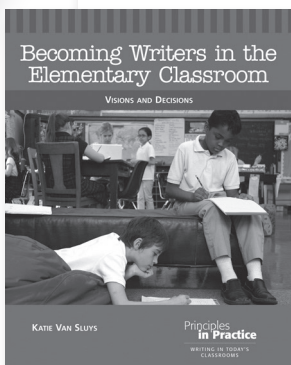
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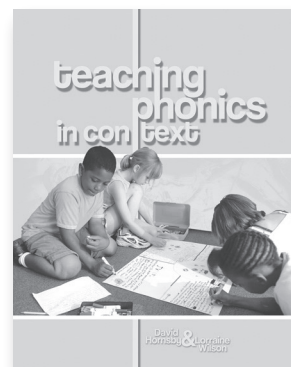
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