



Constructivist Teaching by Heart

Newsletter, September 2026

"Putting children at the center of learning."

A Workshop Approach to Teaching and Learning

It's a new school year! Kids are excited to be back, meet their new teacher, and see their friends again. Constructivist teachers are learning about each child and what they need to become skilled, engaged readers, writers, speakers, listeners, and thinkers. Dana and I (Krista) have a few questions we ask ourselves at the beginning of the school year. Here are three:



- How does the classroom setup support individual student learning and the classroom community working together?
- Now that I have decorated my room, set out all the supplies for the students, and arranged the desks, tables, and chairs for optimal learning, does my classroom feel like it belongs to all of us?
- Does my classroom operate like a children's workshop? Where will children work alone, in groups, and together as a whole?

A classroom that feels like a children's workshop is one where kids can gather resources needed to support learning. They can work independently, in small groups, and in whole-group structures across the school day. The curriculum offers opportunities for students to have choice and agency. It is a place where students will thrive emotionally, intellectually, and socially.

I wonder how often we are considering the workshop approach in today's classrooms. For much of my teaching career, there was a persistent focus on math workshops, reading workshops, writing workshops, inquiry-based science and social studies with projects, learning centers/stations, and class meetings. Now the focus appears to have shifted more to whole-group direct instruction, skills-based teaching, and everyone being on the same page at the same time. We know the pendulum in education swings back and forth, and these aspects may better reflect where we are on that continuum right now.

Like cooperative learning, which has stood the test of time because learning is social and students learn more when working together, Dana and I feel workshop-style teaching is also timeless. Like cooperative learning, it can work in any school setting, curriculum, and grade level.

So, let's go a little deeper. What is workshop-style teaching? What does the term "workshop" bring to mind for you? Santa's workshop? Something similar to a woodworking class where a product is created? Possibly a teacher in-service where teachers don't just listen, but create lessons and materials and take them back to their classroom? What about the common phrase,

“we’re going to ‘workshop’ this idea,” meaning to try it out and hone it over time? You may be thinking of a combination of many of these examples.

Let’s zero in on the workshop in the context of literacy learning. After much reading and many discussions over the summer, Dana and I would like to propose a new definition of the reading and writing workshop. One that brings reading, writing, speaking, and listening together into one literacy workshop. The literacy workshop includes explicit teaching of important skills - phonics, fluency, grammar, and reading and writing skills. It also includes reading a large volume of texts, including books, poetry, articles, and our own written texts. The literacy workshop includes writing instruction and daily student writing, with plenty of speaking and listening mixed in.

Furthermore, the literacy workshop includes multiple read-alouds, author studies, and genre studies across the week. Small group work, book clubs, writing groups, or strategy-focused groups meet daily. Some small groups focus on a reading or writing skill or strategy, such as editing or reading fluently, while others read and discuss the same text together, with coaching and support from the teacher. In the workshop, students have ample time to practice the literacy skills they are working to master. We are teaching for understanding, rather than jumping on the hamster wheel of constant assigning and grading. Some of the time, students also have opportunities to read and write what they want to read and write (agency!). All of these experiences lead to students learning to;



- Grow as word solvers and spellers.
- Compare and contrast,
- Analyze characters and draw conclusions,
- Determine the main idea and supporting details,
- Identify themes and character development;
- Build content knowledge and vocabulary;
- Use text structures to comprehend,
- Apply skills and strategies to build knowledge with each read or written text, and so on...

A day-in-and-day-out literacy workshop teaches the curriculum while increasing the amount of meaningful practice students experience. In this block of time, teachers are immersed in teaching each child one at a time and all at once. Constructivist teachers take this approach to the classroom to avoid one-size-fits-all teaching, which can be hit or miss for student learning.

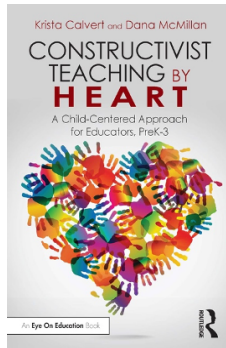
This type of teaching can work with most curricular materials, yet our focus goes beyond the pacing guide. Pacing guides make sense because they ensure students have access to the entire curriculum. Yet, pacing also has to work for students to increase their understanding and engagement. After all, isn't student understanding and engagement **everything** when it comes to student learning?

Sometimes, in our explicit phonics instruction, for example, we may be teaching the students to read beginning and ending consonant blends and digraphs, and we realize that students have some confusion about previous phonics skills, which makes this focus difficult or confusing for them because they don't have the foundation to build on. So we circle back and teach those foundational skills and then build them back into the current learning. Workshop teaching can



sometimes feel like three steps forward and one step back because we can't leave kids hanging when they need some reteaching and more practice.

Meeting kids where they are doesn't mean simplifying the curriculum and teaching kids a shorter, simpler version of the skill. It means finding out where the learning broke down (or what foundational skills are still needed), what steps need to happen for the child to move forward, and how we can support their path through one-on-one coaching or small-group instruction, plus lots of opportunities for authentic practice. We keep the same goal for their achievement.



I have taught many students at many ages who get very confused about those middle vowel sounds. I've noticed that when I teach long and short vowels, then move to vowel-r, then vowel teams, then irregular vowel spellings, and then vowels in syllables, students sometimes learn the new skill well, but previous skills can become confusing again. So we circle back. One example of this circling back is when, recently, I had a student writing his opinion about a story and spelling the word 'like' with two l's (Ilike). When I asked him about it, he said that in class he was learning that l's always came in pairs. We discussed that this often happens after a vowel, such as in the word 'ball', but not at the beginning of the word. With a little practice on word

families with double l, such as -ell, I think he'll be right back on track. Without a circle back to the spelling rule he had learned much earlier in his school career, that confusion may have tripped him up for a while.

I also see many students who are very successful when the work on phonics skills is in isolation but have difficulty transferring those skills to reading and writing continuous texts. On the other hand, I have students who struggle with skills in isolation but read masterfully when reading a book for meaning. Those vowel sounds that were confusing in isolation just roll off their tongues. If both types of learners can use what they're successful at to improve what they need to work on, they will keep growing.

In a nutshell, the literacy workshop offers clear instruction and a lot of time for practice and feedback. Practice, practice, practice! is the key to knowledge building. Getting real-time feedback is crucial for this learning. Otherwise, students may be practicing it the wrong way. After practicing the wrong way for a while, it can take much longer to sort out.

Most curriculum materials give us ample options and lessons to practice almost anything the children need. We just have to know who needs what. That is a constructivist teacher's superpower. Is this harder for teachers? It certainly can be more time-intensive. But if you're checking in on kids and their work in the classroom, there will be less to take home and check, and less reteaching.

Often, we have to go back to the old adage, "Sometimes, we have to go slow to go fast." In literacy, this means students have to sort out their confusions, then take that learning and build on it. This all works best with engaged students. In addition, offering interesting texts written by skilled authors, and then expressing comprehension and insights through discussion and



writing brings explicit spelling, phonics, grammar, and vocabulary instruction to life.

Math Workshop is similar; social studies and science are similar but integrated more with inquiry, projects, and technical writing. In these content areas, we partner read, keep science notebooks, math notebooks, or reading logs. There's really no "one and done." It's a work in progress, as each of us is a work in progress.

For this school year of newsletters, Dana and I would like to dig deeper into the workshop model for literacy instruction and classroom teaching. We are very interested in bringing reading and writing workshop together into a Literacy Workshop where students read and write across multiple books and topics every day. A time when whole-group, small-group, and individual instruction supports students where they are, and student choice, projects, and inquiry are valued as powerful and engaging teaching tools. This is the teacher's journey. We love being on this journey with you.

A Workshop Approach to Teaching and Learning Reflection Questions:



How do you incorporate a workshop approach in your literacy block? What activities are most important in this workshop approach?



What have you noticed about your students as learners so far this year? Do some need more time for practice and understanding of foundational skills?

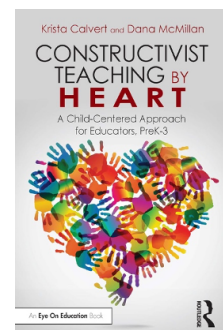
We want to hear from you!

Share your comments about this newsletter topic, A Workshop Approach to Teaching and Learning, here.

PONDER BOX

I love the quote, "Practice doesn't make perfect; practice makes permanent." This means we must quickly catch a student's misunderstanding before it becomes permanent.

-Constructivist Teaching by Heart: A Child-Centered Approach for Educators, PreK-3, p. 79.

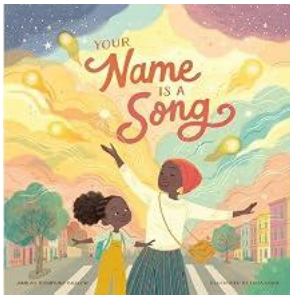


Teaching with High-quality Children's Books

Reading and Writing Across Multiple Books

Reading and writing across two or more books, poems, or articles increases opportunities for knowledge building, thinking, rich discussion, vocabulary, and comprehension within our students. This teaching strategy is not new but is gaining traction for increasing writing practice and applying isolated literacy skills to authentic reading and writing in the literacy block or literacy workshop.

Here are two engaging picture books that are fantastic for building classroom community and help students make personal connections to texts in word study, reading, and writing. These texts, focused on children and their names, can be taught together for a rich literacy lesson experience. Below are lesson ideas for teaching across these two texts, including skills, word study, and reading and writing practice.



***Your Name is a Song* by Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow**

Synopsis: After a frustrating first day of school where her teacher and classmates repeatedly fumble and mispronounce her name, a young African-American girl tells her mother she is never going back. Her mother takes her on a lyrical walk through the city, teaching her that names are beautiful, powerful songs. She explains that names carry history, rhythm, and heart—some sound like the wind, others stomp like drums, and others glide like jazz. Empowered by this musical perspective, the girl returns to school the next day ready to patiently and proudly sing her name—and the names of her classmates—to the room.



***The Boy Who Tried to Shrink His Name* by Sandhya Parappukkaran**

Synopsis: Zimbu is a young Indian-Australian boy starting at a new school. He feels his full name is too long, too complicated, and too much of a burden for his new classmates to pronounce. To fit in and avoid awkward stares, he decides to "shrink" his name down to just "Zim." However, as he makes a new friend and takes up skateboarding, he realizes that shrinking his name makes him feel like he is shrinking his true self. Through the physical metaphor of learning a new skateboard trick—stretching out, balancing, and trying again—Zimbu finds the confidence to stretch his name back out to its full, vibrant length.

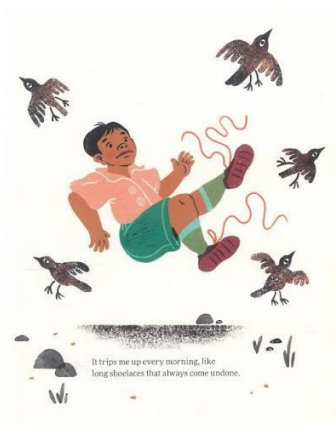


READ, TALK, WRITE! *Your Name is a Song*

- How did the main character feel at the very beginning of the book compared to after her walk with her mom? What changed her mind?
- The mother says names can sound like fire, water, or a drum. Close your eyes and think about your own name—what kind of instrument or sound does your name feel like?
- When the teacher mispronounced the girl's name, what could the teacher have done differently to make her feel welcome and respected?



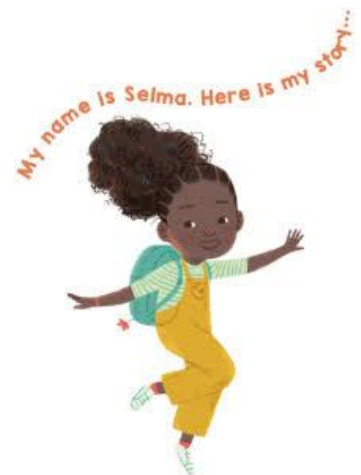
READ, TALK, WRITE! *The Boy Who Tried to Shrink His Name*



- Why did Zimbu want to shrink his name? What does it mean to "shrink yourself" to fit in?
- How did Zimbu's new friend help him, even without realizing it? How can we be a friend like that to someone new?
- At the end of the story, how does Zimbu feel when his friends finally say his full name out loud?

READ, TALK, WRITE! Compare and Contrast

- Both Sadie and Zimbu face the exact same problem on their first day of school. In your own words, what is that problem, and why does it hurt their feelings?
- Sadie uses *music and rhythm* to teach people her name. Zimbu uses *skateboarding and stretching* to find his confidence. How are these two ideas different, and how are they the same?
- Look at the illustrations at the beginning of both books versus the very end. How do the artists use color or body language to show that both characters went through the same emotional journey?



WORD STUDY! Multi-Syllable Name Mapping (Syllable Scoops)

- **Focus:** Students learn that long or unfamiliar names are not so hard to read because they have smaller word parts (syllables) put together. Every syllable *must* have a vowel sound.
- **The Phonics Rule:** Open vs. Closed Syllables.



- **How to Teach:** Write the characters' names on the board. Have students use whiteboards to draw "scoops" under each syllable as they say them.
 - **Zim-bu:** Two syllables. *Zim* is a closed syllable (short /i/ sound). *Bu* is an open syllable (making a long /u/ or /oo/ variant sound).
 - **Sa-die:** Two syllables. *Sa* is an open syllable. *Die* features a **vowel team (ie)** making the long /e/ sound in this name.
- **Classroom Extension:** Have students "scoop" and map out the syllables of their own names, identifying how many vowel sounds they hear.



WORD STUDY! Decoding "Unfamiliar" Letter Combinations

- **Focus:** Many names use phonetic combinations that we call "irregular" because they are not common spelling patterns. This lesson teaches students to flex their phonemic awareness.
- **The Phonics Rule:** Digraphs, blends, and vowel variations.

Thanks for reading! Do you have comments, ideas, or questions for the newsletter? Submit [here!](#)

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