The Workshop Philosophy

The workshop approach to literacy is built on the premise that students are active learners with many choices and decisions to make. Their work is front and center in combination with teacher modeling and one-on-one and small-group guidance. This approach, as spearheaded by Lucy Calkins (Founding Director of the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project at Columbia University), grows out of a pedagogical theory aligned with natural literacy development. It espouses teaching readers and writers, not the reading and writing. This means equipping students with the strategies, not just the skills, needed to be proficient, lifelong readers and writers.

Independence and choice are fundamental characteristics of this approach to literacy. Teachers inform and guide students and their work. This equips and empowers students with the skills and strategies needed to navigate their own literacy, not just at school, but in their lives.

The 60-minute workshop structure is consistent across grade levels and disciplines. It begins with a 10-minute minilesson, where a new concept or expansion on an existing one is taught. This is followed up with 30+ minutes of independent work time, where the student is in charge of his or her work. Students are supported and their instruction individualized through one-on-one conferences with the teacher and/or strategic small group work. A 2-3 minute mid-workshop interruption offers an additional teaching point or reminder to support student work. Sharing time concludes the workshop.

Reading Workshop

Reading Workshop emphasizes the interaction between readers and texts. Its goal is to maximize student learning through purposeful, planned instruction aligned to the Common Core State Standards. For example, students learn to ask questions, make connections with prior knowledge and previously read texts, and ask questions to clarify recognized faulty comprehension. Students are encouraged to record their thinking on sticky notes or in their notebooks. This documentation enables them to chart their progress and continually update their goals, perpetually moving toward deeper levels of comprehension and higher-level thinking work.

Students work on a variety of strategies to strengthen their thinking within a text, about a text, and beyond a text. Their thinking within the text involves solving words, monitoring and correcting themselves as they read, searching for and using information, summarizing, reading fluently, and making needed adjustments as they read. Their thinking about the text requires them to critique and analyze what they are reading. Their thinking beyond the text expects them to infer, synthesize, make connections, and predict.

Classroom libraries can be organized by reading level bands, topics, series, or even genres. Students are guided to read within their instructional reading band each week to practice and shore up the strategies they are working on. While alphabetic letter levels are a tool we use to help identify the strategies students are working on, we do not identify students by them. In other words, a child might be reading
Level M books. This does not mean s/he is a Level M. The student is a reader. The level merely helps the child and the teacher know how best to support the reading work being done at this stage in their development.

**Assessment: Reading**

Assessment-driven instruction guides our practice at MCS. We use both formal and informal assessments to determine best next learning steps for students.

**Formal Reading Assessment:**

*Irene Fountas & Gay Su Pinnell*

Irene Fountas (professor at Lesley University) and Gay Su Pinnell (Professor Emeritus in the School of Teaching and Learning at The Ohio State University) have devoted their lives to literacy learning and developing teacher expertise in it through extensive research and classroom work. Their *Benchmark Assessment Systems 1 and 2* are widely adopted and accepted as the staple in measuring student reading proficiency.

NOTE: These assessments are given at least three times a year to not only determine where a student currently is in his or her reading but to inform next learning steps for the student.

**Informal Reading Assessment:**

*Conferring Notes*

As teachers meet with individual students in one-on-one conferences as well as in small groups, they are recording notes on what the student is doing well and what the next learning steps are. Progress is monitored over time using these notes and helps to determine instruction.

*Observations*

A lot goes on in a classroom on any given day. The day-to-day occurrences form general observations that teachers are able to make about students over the course of time. These observations also serve to guide next instructional steps.

**Writing Workshop**

Writing Workshop follows the same structure as Reading Workshop. It provides explicit, sequenced instruction that equips students to progress purposefully in their writing. This approach is responsive, developmentally appropriate, and result oriented. Students are given extensive opportunities to explore ideas, techniques, and write. They build their writing fluency, while also setting goals and critiquing their own work. Feedback, both positive and critical, are at the heart of developing proficient writers. This feedback is not only given by the teacher but students are taught how to give it to one another.

**Assessment: Writing**

Assessment-driven instruction guides our practice at MCS. We use both formal and informal assessments to determine best next learning steps for students. In writing, there are three learning progressions, one for each text structure (opinion, information, and narrative) as well as grade-
by-grade checklists, grade-specific rubrics, three benchmark texts illustrating at-standards-level, and on-demand opinion, information, and narrative writing.

**Formal Writing Assessment:**

*On-Demand Writing*

Before instruction begins on a new text structure, students are assessed. They spend forty-five minutes writing an on-demand text that teachers then score and use to determine the best, most efficient, and effective instructional pathway to take. At the end of the unit, students are reassessed in this same manner to determine level of mastery.

**Informal Writing Assessment:**

*Conferring Notes*

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Second Grade

Reading

In second grade, teachers build upon the skills taught in first grade and guide students through a variety of units.

- **Second-Grade Reading Growth Spurt** (Literature)
  - Since students’ texts are longer and more complex, they begin the important work of summarizing to concisely retell their books. They learn to appreciate the choices an author makes in their texts. They also learn how to synthesize what they are reading. For example, they think about how the various parts in their books fit together. This enables them to make inferences and retell what they have read.

- **Becoming Experts: Reading Nonfiction** (Information)
  - The sophisticated books for students at this level are vocabulary-rich and begin the transition from learning to read to reading to learn. Students rely heavily on context to navigate these new vocabulary challenges. They also learn to identify various text structures that help students organize their learning from their reading. They compare new knowledge to existing, and compare and contrast information among texts.

- **Bigger Books Mean Amping Up Reading Power** (Literature)
  - Improving fluency (reading that simulates natural, oral speech) and examining literary language are prominent components of this unit. They help students think about nuance, tone, and mood. Students learn to read in bigger scoops, notice dialogue tags, use meaning when reading, and read at just-the-right pace. They also learn to make comparisons and identify special language. Finally, students learn how to hold onto longer storylines.

- **Series Book Clubs** (Literature)
  - This unit provides many opportunities for students to examine their texts carefully and to contemplate the reasons why characters do things. They collect information about main characters, pay attention to how characters respond to problems, grow their understanding of characters across several books, and use this to make well-informed predictions. Students also examine their author’s craft, noticing the words chosen, how literary language is employed, and thinking about how the series works together.

Writing

In second grade, students work on a variety of skills to develop their competencies with each text structure. Checklists and rubrics are powerful tools they use to self-assess their writing and determine next steps. Frequent revision work lifts student writing along the way.

- **Lessons from the Masters: Improving Narrative Writing** (Narrative)
  - Examining mentor authors is at the heart of this unit. It equips students with an array of tools to enhance their own pieces. For example, students learn to elaborate by incorporating details. They learn to lift the level of their writing by crafting powerful beginnings and endings. Finally, they hone in on their word choices and language usage.
• **Lab Reports and Science Books** (Information)
  o Students learn to think and write like scientists. The work they are guided through leads to a four-page lab report booklet (hypothesis, procedure, results, and conclusion). They then move onto writing to teach others about their discoveries and topics. Finally, they learn to write precisely and succinctly, incorporating domain-specific vocabulary and elaborating in purposeful ways.

• **Writing About Reading** (Opinion)
  o Letter-writing is the familiar format given to students so they can share about their books. They learn to formulate their opinions clearly and support their thinking with reasons, details, and examples from the text. They also learn how to incorporate quotations, make comparisons between books, and write persuasive introductions and conclusions.

• **Poetry: Big Thoughts in Small Packages** (Narrative)
  o This unit teaches students that poetry is music on paper. They learn how objects and feelings spark their words. They learn how line breaks enhance meaning. Students also learn how repetition, metaphor, white space, and language are powerful poet tools at their disposal. Finally, students experiment with a variety of poem structures to capture their intended meaning.