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:**

*Fountas & 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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Fourth Grade

Reading

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

- **Interpreting Characters: The Heart of the Story** (Literature)
  - Fourth graders learn to read more deeply, seeing more in their texts, pushing themselves to notice small details, envisioning characters as real and complicated people, observing ways the settings influence the plot, and recognizing inferred themes. Students also learn to see small actions as signals to deeper text meaning. They build their fictional genre and text structure knowledge to enable them to read actively, intensely, and with purpose. This foundational work equips students to pay attention to details, look back, and trace a theme throughout a text and comparing and contrasting how a similar theme is developed differently.

- **Reading Weather, Reading the World** (Information)
  - Strengthening their knowledge of text structure to determine the organization of a text enables students to ascertain what is important within a text and hone in on its main idea(s) and relevant supporting details. This equips them to succinctly summarize, rather than retell, the text, which dramatically deepens their comprehension and understanding of it. Students learn to identify transition words and associate them with their corresponding text. Additionally, students cultivate their envisioning skills to help them translate the words they read into mental images that lead them to connect the dots between various parts of the text.

- **Reading History: The American Revolution** (Information)
  - In addition to utilizing the text structure work learned in the previous unit, students hone in on the content of the text and learn about how events impact other events, often in a chain reaction. They also learn the influence one individual can have on the overall outcome. Additionally, they strengthen their thinking about relationships between abstract ideas and iterations of those ideas. Students continue to read multiple texts and synthesize their learning from them. Finally, students work intentionally to develop their own ideas about the information they are reading by learning how to pose questions and wonderings as they read.

- **Historical Fiction Clubs** (Literature)
  - There are more characters to keep track of, more plotlines to follow, and more nuanced settings to make sense of in their texts at this point in the year. Additionally, these texts contain more flashbacks, flash-forwards, gaps in time, different perspectives, and varying places. These texts provide students continued opportunities to make deep, rich interpretations that engage them in strong, analytic reading. Students learn to think about why things change in a story, about the subtleties that cause these changes, and about the role character reactions play in their overall understanding of the text.
Writing

In fourth 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.

- **The Arc of Story: Writing Realistic Fiction** (Narrative)
  - Students learn how to conceive, develop, plan, and execute their own fiction stories. They develop their storytellers’ voices by rehearsing with partners. They advance their treatment of characters in their stories by thinking beyond the character’s physical attributes and knowing them intimately before they even begin writing the story. Students determine their characters’ fears, strengths, weaknesses, wants, needs, and goals. They learn that a storyline emerges from the intersection of a character’s motivation and the obstacles that get in the way. Additionally, they learn to hone in on creating two or three strong scenes to successfully show a character, the plot, and even a setting change over the course of their stories.

- **Boxes and Bullets: Personal and Persuasive Essays** (Opinion)
  - This unit kicks off with an essay boot camp that initiates students into this new form of opinion writing. To do this work effectively, students will regularly reflect, examine mentor texts, and engage in various inquiries along the way. They will learn how to organize their evidence by reasons, use strong transitions to provide cohesion, provide introductions that orient and engage their readers, and write compelling conclusions. The unit begins under the close guidance of the teacher and concludes with students crafting their own essays independently.

- **Bringing History to Life** (Information)
  - Fourth graders build upon the boxes-and-bullets format previously learned to draft chapters going from general topics to more specific ones within a single piece. Their text structure sophistication increases through formatting upgrades (headings and subheadings), mixing genres within one piece (one chapter organized as an all-about, another as a how-to, and a third as an essay), and information that is rich, detailed, and concrete. Students are strategically taught effective research writing skills and how to draw evidence to support their analysis and reflection.

- **The Literary Essay: Writing About Fiction** (Narrative)
  - Close reading of mentor texts is at the heart of the literary essay. Students learn to read texts with attentiveness, examining, questioning, and evaluating an author’s various choices, such as the setting, objects, words, figurative language, and characters. Under the teacher’s expert guidance, this work transfers to their own writing about their reading. They will build upon what they learned in *The Arc of Story: Writing Realistic Fiction*, arguing for their characters by providing compelling evidence in support of their reasons. They will conclude this work by examining all sides of an issue and drafting compare-and-contrast essays about themes and topics in literature.