

Beyond 21st Century Learning: C.O.U.N.T on Creating Authentic and Relevant Writing Experiences in the Classroom

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Introduction

Writing is a skill in which students transpire their thoughts, and through integrated lessons it can be spread across curriculums—but the lack of relevant and authentic experiences to write openly often stifle the performance, engagement, and creativity of students. Alismail & McGuire (2015) state, “They should use innovative strategies and modern learning technologies that help integrate cognitive and social skills with content knowledge as well as increase student participation in the learning environment in order to promote these future skills” (p. 152). Educators, teacher educators, curriculum designers, and specialists must go beyond thinking outside of the box—and instead bridge the gap that exists between students’ perceptions of their abilities and the expectations of standards-based curriculum—even if it means breaking away from traditional literacies at times.

Literacy and writing instruction have evolved over the years but have not quite fulfilled the 21st century standards that is often sought by many school districts. In NCTE’s position statement on writing instruction in schools, it was opined that, “Writing instruction often mirrors test preparation, with students filling in templates and following formulas rather than making important and intentional decisions about writing for authentic audiences and purpose” (National Council of Teachers of English, n.d.). Cannavino’s research (2016) studies the relationship between best practices in writing instruction and standardized testing, and found themes such as collaborative writing, process-based writing, and teaching of genre are effective. Cannavino (2016) also revealed, “...in addition to the goal of test preparation, writing teachers have an expectation to equip students with skills that will prepare students to write in college and beyond (p.72).”

When it comes to making improvements, writing instruction is often left off strategic plans of schools and state systems altogether. Students need to know that writing is more than a template required to pass a test, and that the purpose of writing is to communicate perspectives, to give information, and to entertain the world with stories and various genres. For many years, school districts and state boards of education have coveted mission statements that share the need to have students prepared for the demands of the 21st century workforce. It has been twenty-four years since the 21st century began, and many of the mission statements have not changed. Writing curriculum has changed and made advancements through the use and implementation of technology standards in lesson planning and assessment. However, there is the need to further advance in the building of resiliency and confidence in literacy learning prior to major shifts in society (ex. COVID pandemic)—and not being reactive or making changes after the fact. Yancey (2009) suggested that we work towards considering the development of new or

unexplored models of writing, and work towards designing a new curriculum and creating models for teaching that support the new curriculum. Ahmed (2022) shares that “In language instruction, researchers were able to identify skills associated with 21st century but have not pointed out what exact process should language educators creatively perform about 21st century materials that may address the needs of students as technology breakthroughs manifest around learners’ real-world environment” (p. 1306).

There needs to be a shift to what is relevant and timely—while looking ahead. How far will policymakers go into this century preparing students for 21st century learning without clearly defining steps? After researching numerous state documents and state standards across the country, when researching literacy and the 21st century, preparedness is often a focus, but the conversation does not go much further. The vagueness of the term “21st century” needs a more consistent definition and set of standards. The statement sounds good on paper, but what does that look like in a literacy setting?

What Should 21st Century Writing Instruction Look Like?

Writing and literacy instruction that addresses 21st century needs should address the domains of writing, reading, listening, speaking—and explore digital and visual literacies. These domains should also promote the various purposes and impacts of writing—not simply for assignments but should teach students how writing is weaved into their lives daily.

Writing is used across content areas. Literacy educators should not hold the sole responsibility of providing quality writing instruction and experiences. Writing instruction with a 21st century flair should prioritize writing in its various forms, phases, and abilities (typed text, written words, symbols, scripts, genres, dialects, etc.). As student populations and schools grow more diverse, in ethnicity and race, and in learning styles, a true 21st century writing curriculum should allow for students to understand the importance of voice and action that stems from the writing process.

Relevance and Authenticity in Writing Instruction

In the next section, *Table 1* shows some proposed examples of standards and potential framework that capture the magnitude of the change and creativity needed to revamp writing instruction.

Table 1

Suggestions for Revamping 21st Century Writing Instruction with Authenticity and Relevancy

Suggested Revamping of Writing Curriculum for Relevancy and Authenticity	What Does this Mean?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing curriculum should be infused with relevant and authentic experiences. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Standards should address cross-curricular writing • Standards should address content area writing • Standards should address procedural writing • Standards should address writing-to-learn • Standards should promote higher order thinking tasks such as students creating their own writing prompts • Standards should allow for student buy-in when planning and assessing activities (give them the opportunities for self and peer review)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing curriculum should be a collaborative effort that is implemented as a community experience—in the classroom, school, community and home. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students’ writing/literacy community should include students/peers, teachers (in various core-subjects and elective subjects), community efforts and issues, and experiences in the home environment. • Students need further opportunities to give feedback through peer review • Parents/guardians should be included in the processes and lessons involving the teaching of writing, so that skills can be used outside of the classroom
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In addition to addressing current needs, writing curriculum should prepare for students for their future. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students’ writing preparation for the future should include, but is not limited to career and communication skills (peer, professional, social, digital) • Current needs (skills, strategies, prompts, events) should be addressed, and allow flexibility and time for students to anticipate future needs • Students should have opportunities to write for reflection and think critically
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing curriculum should provide students with experiences to write about career related topics. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide exposure for opportunities for various uses of writing in careers • Explore real world uses and various types of writing • Students need to have opportunities to learn and write about global needs and issues in order to become leaders in their future careers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing and its curriculum should be a language that transcends styles, genres, and mediums. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give students the opportunity to write in more narrative styles • Allow the opportunity for students to write more fiction • Allow students the chance to write for leisure purposes

Relevance and authenticity are key components that make it a bit easier for students to be receptive to learning challenging and new material. The process and experience of learning to write and continuing to develop writing, is a personal and often vulnerable journey. Today's students could benefit from the personalization of curriculum that authenticity and relevance bring.

Relevance in Writing

Providing relevant learning experiences is a key element of getting students engaged and being willing to buy in to new learning scenarios. Students often are intimidated by having their writing evaluated or fearful of going through the writing process altogether. This often stems from feelings of being judged for their thoughts, but even more the fear of just not getting it right. Writing that is considered correct or proper English, is writing that is grammatically correct and follows the norms of traditional literacy instruction (abides by certain standards, styles, and rules). David & Jansky (2017, 2018), state that English teachers should be developing spaces that allow students to "...fall in love with writing and build a writerly identity" (p.25). The researchers (David & Jansky, 2018) go on to further say, "As new standards or new tests or new mandates or new programs roll in—and roll in they will—consider that writing should not bend to serve only those purposes" (p. 25). Not bending means that students need reasons to write that will surpass assessment results and provide them with confidence and purpose for their developed skills.

Troia (2014) states that "...writing is a high-effort, high-cost activity" and therefore "students must view their assigned writing tasks as purposeful and relevant to their lives in and out of school" (p. 34). Writing is personal to whoever composes it, and it takes a certain level of vulnerability to create, and trust for it to be shared. So, it becomes a more positive and beneficial writing experience if writing tasks are relevant. Relevant tasks include those that focus on or parallel experiences in their daily lives—family, interests, friends, etc., and things that students fill their cultural environment with—such as digital games, music, television, social media, food, etc. "Students must have opportunities to choose the topics about which they write, to whom they write, and to what ends, as long as writing assignments present reasonable levels of challenge that help students grow as writers" (Troia, 2014, p. 34-35). Relevance in writing instruction promotes evolution and provides the needed flexibility and open-endedness for growth.

Authenticity in Writing

Authentic writing assignments involve educators planning tasks that are real-world relevant and meaningful. Tasks that are considered "highly authentic" are those which are "relevant to students' interests and encourage students to learn more deeply out of personal enjoyment" (Barrett, 2023, p. 6) and "these tasks also help students retain their learning" (Barrett, 2023, pg. 6). Authentic tasks allow students to make connections between their reality and what is expected in literacies explored within their classroom settings. Authentic writing also allows for students to "...strengthen their voices, extend their thinking, and even become better readers" (Institute of Education Sciences, 2021, para. 6). Writing authentically allows for students to "strengthen their thinking, produce new knowledge, express themselves and impact others"

(Behizadeh, 2019, p. 411) and the opposite of that is “formulaic writing instruction in which students focus on conventions, mechanics, grammar, and punctuation” (Behizadeh, 2019, p. 411). Students need both types of instruction, but educators need to unlock the power that resides in authentic creative writing lessons in which students see themselves as authors and can express themselves and their ideas and thoughts through writing. Childs’ (2023) C.O.U.N.T. acronym (*Figure 1*) designates ways to find this balance.

Figure 1

Childs’ C.O.U.N.T. Acronym

C- Culturally Responsive Writing

O- Opportunities to Write Beyond Assessment

U- Unpack Problems and Issues to Demonstrate the Power of Writing

N- Narrative Writing is Relevant Writing

T- Technology is Key

C.O.U.N.T. on Creating Authentic and Relevant Writing Experiences

Too often, in educational settings, the curriculum leaves writing assignments up to the ELA/Literacy teacher, and students only get a narrow window of opportunity to write in school (if at all). Traditional writing assignments and exercises are becoming more of an afterthought. Students need to be taught the value of writing, through authentic and relevant experiences, and the various manners, situations, conversations, and places in which their writing can be used. Educators need resources to help reimagine how they use writing within their classrooms. Childs’ (2022, 2023) C.O.U.N.T. acronym has been shared in the past for using for writing across curriculum and other subject areas (like mathematics), but the version below may be used as a framework to fuel authenticity and relevance specifically into writing and literacy lessons in English and Language Arts classroom settings.

Culturally Responsive Writing

To reach students, there must be an understanding that each group of students that come within their classroom environment bring their own culture. Curriculum is written to help educators accomplish the goal of getting students to master standards put in place by the district and state. However, to get students to better understand curriculum, connections must be made so that students can get where they need to be. Providing culturally relevant (and culturally responsive) materials and facilitating a setting that allows for students to develop a sense of self through writing, helps them to develop their literacy skills and learn about those around them. It is important to note, that culturally responsive writing requires:

- Students respond better to writing and literature which they can identify and relate to.
- Educators must acknowledge the culture in which students bring to the classroom and find ways to merge and create a shared culture.

- Traditional literacies are not “better than” newer developing literacies (ex. digital, visual), and vernacular, dialects, slang, and accents *are* languages—and should not be ignored or devalued.

Opportunities to Write Beyond Assessment

Students need the opportunity to write beyond doing writing assignments for assessment purposes. Students should know that writing has more of a purpose besides being critiqued, and there isn't always a right or wrong creating written expression. Some opportunities and strategies that educators can utilize to write beyond assessment includes:

- Using open-ended writing prompts (in which students can have some control of the direction of their writing—and not the teacher)
- Create opportunities for students to write non-traditional pieces such as scripts, lyrics commercials, etc.
- Have students respond to the writing of their peers, as well as various levels of authors (different types of genres, new authors, veteran authors, classic authors, modern authors, etc.)

Writing should be assessed—however, students need to have positive associations with their writing experiences, and well as have freedom to explore their voice— and too often standardized assessments stifle student voices.

Unpack Problems and Issues to Demonstrate the Power of Writing

Writing reaches a wide array of audiences and students need to know the power of their words and its imprint that it can make. Writing is often a form of reflection, therapy, and a way to map out thought processes. Whether it be a problem that needs to be solved or an issue that needs analyzing, writing can be a way to strengthen the voice and problem-solving abilities of students. Some opportunities to demonstrate the power of writing and unpacking problems with students include:

- Have students write about real-world issues, problems, and possible solutions from their communities and learning environments. This can be done with a variety of grade levels and abilities.
- Have students write about decisions or tough choices that they have had to make. This allows students to not only reflect on their problem-solving skills but allows them the opportunity to possibly explore other perspectives.
- Create scenarios for the students to write about and challenge them to create their own prompts and scenarios.

Teaching students to write about problems, scenarios, and issues awake their problem-solving skills, and give them an outlet to use when they are having problems. Their writing not only becomes a skill, but a strategy to help sort them through life's journeys.

Narrative Writing is Relevant Writing

Narrative writing is relevant and authentic writing. Narrative writing allows students to learn and explore using language structures, sequence, and to further develop their own writing style. Writing in a narrative style allows for the sharing of varying points of views and perspectives. Some potential prompts that could spark interest for all are:

- I can relate to this because...
- My story is like the main character's story, and this is how...
- Once upon a time, I went to...
- I once was really bored, but I became so excited when I got to...

Allowing students to tell their stories and share in the writing process with others is the closest, most vulnerable, most relevant experience that they can have when learning about language and writing.

Technology is Key

Technology is everchanging and using it within instruction requires teachers to stay current in the knowledge of the latest apps, tools, and strategies. Technology also provides multiple modes of communication (text types/genres, videos, music, photographs, charts, and speeches, etc.). The more exposure to digital and multimodal learning, the more versatile students can become in their literacy journey. Some examples of using technology to enhance writing instruction include:

- Constructing creative writing prompts with the assistance of AI (artificial intelligence) programs like ChatGPT
- Using AI to be a guide, a co-author, or as a guide to inspire writing ideas
- Creating blog sites, podcasts, scripts, or apps or using them with traditional literacy lessons

One of the expectations of educators is that students are helped to grow and learn new skillsets in core subject areas. Using technology allows students the option to gain dual abilities—the ability use new technology, and the ability to explore new literacies. All students can be entertained and assisted using technology—they often use the same skills playing games or chatting on social media that educators in classrooms are teaching, but they need help in making the connection between classroom expectations and their reality outside of the classroom.

Conclusion

School districts and educational systems been touting that they are preparing students for the 21st century for approximately forty years. Alismail & McGuire (2015) suggest that flexibility and resourcefulness will be the key to engaging, and not teaching to the test (p. 150). One thing that is certain, is that technology and digital literacies should be at the forefront of efforts to make change. When it comes to the discussion of developing 21st century writing standards, NCTE (2007, 2009) focused on pre-service teachers and stated that they “...should have opportunities to develop competence in their own use of technologies to scaffold the incorporation of technology into the curriculum” (Price-Dennis, et. al, 2014, p.73). Price-Dennis, et. al (2014) go on to say that “developing a culturally relevant approach to teaching writing would entail experimenting

with multiple digital tools as well as print-based literacy practices” (p. 72). Writing instruction will get left behind if it is continued to be developed using 21st century standards with no plans of revision or efforts to evolve them. New literacies and technological resources come about every day, and there will be new ways to use them in the classroom. Using relevant and authentic approaches, as well as multimodal materials in literacy (particularly writing) will yield more well-rounded thinkers and problem solvers, and ultimately provide a more literate and equitable society for all.

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