

All About Me

My favorite color is all shades of green, but mostly lime green. I have a hairy-capped kitten named Sloppy Joe. He is very crazy and likes to run into walls. Soon I think I'm getting a new bird. I don't know what to name it, maybe Vodo-Bing Bo, I don't know! I like to wear little animal earrings, like cats, dogs, frogs that sort of thing. I'm wearing little pink piggy with a heart on their belly. My room is getting redecorated. It is being painted teal and purple, so half of its pink and half of its not.

Have you reread your piece?

What questions might a reader have?

Can you add more detail about redecorating your room?

How do you feel about getting a new bird?

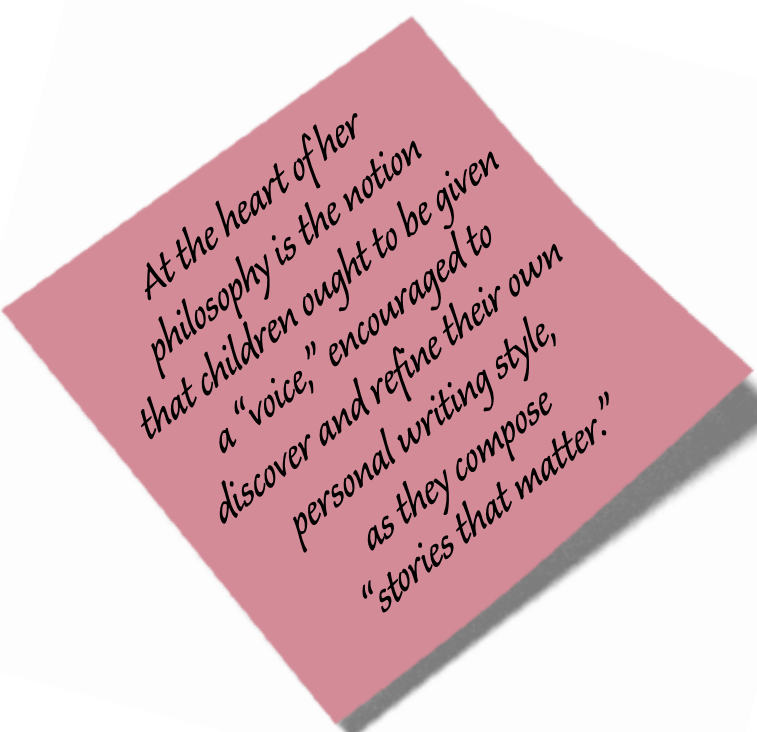
The Lucy Calkins Project

Parsing a self-proclaimed literacy guru

BY BARBARA FEINBERG

Once upon a time there was a thoughtful educator who raised some interesting questions about how children were traditionally taught to read and write, and proposed some innovative changes. But as she became famous, critical debate largely ceased: her word became law. Over time, some of her methods became dogmatic and extreme, yet her influence continued to grow.

That educator is Lucy McCormick Calkins, the visionary founding director of Teachers College Reading and Writing Project. Begun in 1981, the think tank and teacher training institute has since trained hundreds of thousands of educators across the country. Calkins is one of the original architects of the “workshop” approach to teaching writing to children, which holds that writing is a process, with distinct phases, and that all children, not just those with innate talent, can learn to write well. She is author of some 20 books, including the best-selling *The Art of Teaching Writing* (250,000 sold). According to the project web site, books by its leaders are “widely regarded as foundational to language arts education throughout the English-speaking world.”



At the heart of her philosophy is the notion that children ought to be given a “voice,” encouraged to discover and refine their own personal writing style, as they compose “stories that matter.”

While her influence is geographically broad, Calkins is perhaps nowhere more powerful than in New York City, where the project began as a consulting service to a few elementary schools and grew into a highly profitable venture. According to Andrew Wolf of the *New York Sun*, Calkins charges \$1,200 to send one of her assistants into a school for one day. In 2003 schools chancellor Joel Klein appointed her and the project, through a no-bid three-year \$5.4 million contract, to the task of revamping the way literacy skills are taught in more than 100 district schools, including most of those in Brooklyn and Queens, the project’s mission is to retrain—through onsite workshops, leadership seminars, curricular materials, and an intensive summer institute—primary and upper-grade teachers, administrators from principals up through district superintendents, and central department policymakers.

Stories That Matter

Calkins’s approach to literacy grows out of a pedagogical theory that prides itself on being in step with the natural development of both writers and children. Her earliest mentor was the progressive educator Donald Graves, who observed in the 1970s that while American children were taught reading and math, they were only rarely taught how to write beyond grammar and spelling. Graves argued that in being deprived of lessons that would develop the skills and habits that most good writers have, children were relegated to the status of “receivers,” never “senders,” of information. Graves, in

turn, was deeply influenced by Pulitzer Prize–winning writer and college journalism professor Donald Murray, perhaps one of the earliest to describe the craft of writing. By observing his own writing process, Murray delineated a method all writers could follow. “Writing might be magical,” he is often quoted as saying, “but it’s not magic. It’s a process, a rational series of decisions and steps that every writer makes and takes, no matter what the length, the deadline, even the genre.”

Graves adapted Murray’s approach to teaching writing to children. The idea was to make them more conscious of what successful adult writers do—draft ideas, revise, edit, and publish. By involving children in this process, he sought to help them become more active in their own education, and not incidentally, more self-aware; he advocated that children write extensively about themselves and their observations.

Calkins popularized and developed many of the positions taken by Graves regarding writing and later applied them to reading. At the heart of her philosophy is the notion that children ought to be given a “voice,” encouraged to discover and refine their own personal writing style, as they compose “stories that matter.” Calkins is a “constructivist,” believing that children should generate their own texts, using material from their own lives. Her belief in self-expression as a key to learning extends to reading: children develop a passion for reading when they are given freedom to choose books that are meaningful to them. Her approach to literacy reviles “direct teaching,” where the teacher stands in front of the room and lectures, preferring instead that children work in small groups and consult each other as much as possible. And she advocates that teachers routinely engage in conferences with each individual child about his writing and reading experiences (see sidebar). She writes of the “art” involved in teaching and conferring, and thereby suggests that while aspects of literacy can be taught, there also exists a degree of creative intuition in the process, on the part of both the child and the teacher.

No Detours, No Surprises

Some of Calkins’s ideas on writing have made exciting contributions to the life of the classroom. In her nearly 600-page 1986 tome, *The Art of Teaching Writing*, Calkins lays out her rationale and methods for implementing a writers’ workshop in the classroom. She instructs teachers to make room for students to keep a “writer’s notebook,” a place where they can “jot down things they notice and wonder about” and record “bits of life.” Calkins offers up this notion in a relaxed spirit, conjuring a playful atmosphere that encourages creativity. Photographs of lively students and reproductions of students’ writing assignments, done in their own quirky handwriting, add to the friendly and appreciative tone of the book.

In her later work, however, Calkins’s notion of the writer’s notebook is prescriptive, even rigid. She instructs teachers as

well as parents to make sure children “never miss a day” of writing in their notebooks, because “if you allow kids to get off the hook once, they’ll try to get off it all the time.” In *Raising Lifelong Learners* (1998), she describes how she needs to stand over her son while he writes down his thoughts after returning from a play date. The earlier “jotting” and “bits of life” sensibility seems to be gone, as she complains that her sons, then six and four years old, “often say non-sequiturs,” and how she, and all parents and teachers, should confront “sidetracks,” and prohibit any “detours.”

Project staff instruct children to revise their writing, according to sometimes peculiarly stringent guidelines, and do the same to their drawings. Writing coaches instruct even kindergartners to redo their pictures, making some things bigger, smaller, using less white space, etc. At a project open house in 2004, Calkins said, “I tell kids that after they’ve finished writing [personal narrative] they should go back and lop off the beginning and lop off the ending. Those parts are always weak. The meat is always in the middle.” When an audience member asked if there were exceptions to this, she said emphatically, “No.”

To keep the focus on autobiographical writing, the project trains teachers to deter children from writing fantasy of any kind. A six-year-old child whose classroom was under the project’s tutelage remarked to me, “Once upon a time is against the law in our school.” Not long ago Calkins altered her stance modestly and decided that staff in her program can now teach children how to write “realistic fiction.”

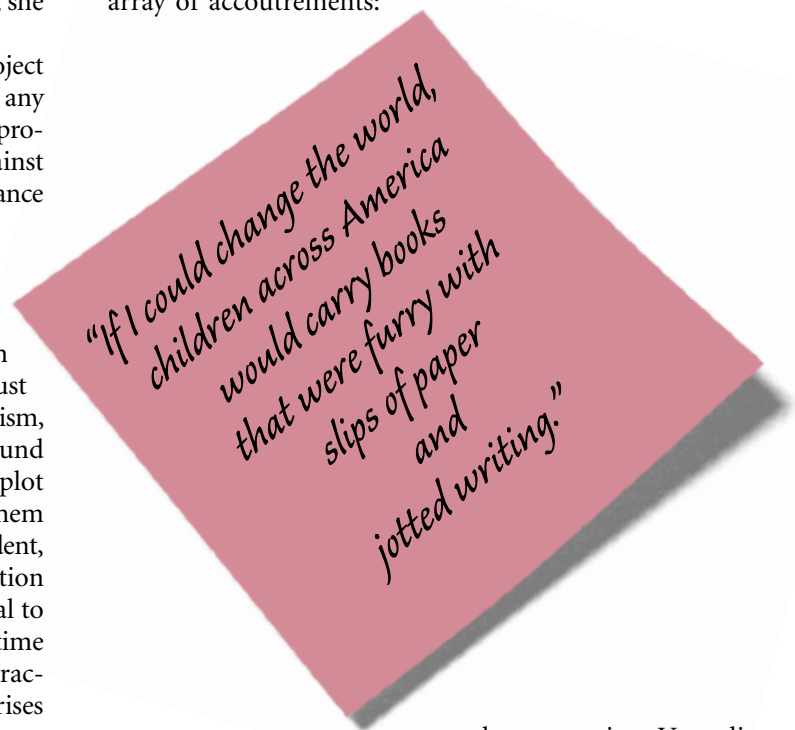
“What’s most important to me,” explained a project staff member during the open house, “are social issues. I teach fiction writing to teach social justice.” She went on to describe her methodology: “I tell students that they must always first start with an issue—gender discrimination, racism, poverty—not a character. Then we create a character around the issue.” She explained that she instructed children to plot the story from start to finish before setting out, telling them to be certain to alternate between “incident, dialogue, incident, dialogue.” While virtually all professional writers of fiction describe the element of surprise and discovery as central to the process, this teacher takes an alternate view: “By the time children begin to write, they know exactly what their characters will do and say. The point is, there should be no surprises when you sit down to write fiction.”

The leader then projected copies of student papers on the wall, where we read several stories about bullying, gender discrimination, etc. The stories were impressively written, although they seemed, after a while, to sound almost uniform; without exception, each protagonist was a victim of some kind. Fictional characters in a project workshop might be described in the same way as literary critic, Sheila Egoff, describes characters in many current teen novels: they are “defined by the terminology of pain.”

It Takes Two to Read a Book

The publication of *The Art of Teaching Reading* (2001) catapulted Calkins to expert status in reading as well. The book offers ideas about setting up libraries in classrooms and the value of offering students a wide selection of books, adults reading aloud, and many other things that go into Calkins’s idea of helping children live a “richly literate life.”

Beginning in kindergarten, children are to regard books as objects of study. They are asked, for example, to compare two books and try to figure out which characters have a “worse life”; make a “study” of Frog and Toad books; or debate whether *Enchantress from the Stars* is fiction or fantasy. Children are asked to keep track—on Post-its, or other diagramming material—of the ways characters’ lives resemble their own. Post-its loom particularly large in the Calkins universe. “If I could change the world,” she writes, “children across America would carry books that were furry with slips of paper and jotted writing.” Indeed, project methods require a vast array of accoutrements:



charts, matrixes, Venn diagrams, page numbers, graphs, reading marathons, bookmarks, book corners, book bags, book celebrations, jazzed up “book talk,” and great discussions about how to live “readerly lives.”

“Every reader has two lives, one public, the other secret,” noted poet and chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, Dana Gioia. Not so in a project classroom. Calkins maintains—for reasons never explained—that reading is



PHOTO / COURTESY OF THE TEACHERS COLLEGE AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

So Do Her Methods Work?

Calkins is shaping the education of millions of children, yet no independent research backs the efficacy of her programs. Aside from grumblings from the New York City teachers required to work under her system, there has been remarkably little open debate about the basic premises behind Calkins's approach, or even feedback on how the programs are faring in the classroom.

What controversy exists generally centers around two concerns: First, her programs do not explicitly teach phonics—which she calls “drill and kill.” She favors a “whole language” approach to literacy, which builds on the premise that reading and writing develop naturally in children. Her detractors argue that this lack of direct instruction leaves many children, especially those who already struggle, at a disadvantage.

The other argument, perhaps resonating with a larger audience, is that her methodology lacks real content, has no reference to any knowledge that should be learned. In *The Art of Teaching Reading*, she explains that she doesn't want “all reading and writing to be in the service of thematic studies” but instead seeks to “spotlight reading and writing in and of themselves.” Calkins's insistence that students should focus mostly on writing about their lives rankles the many educators who believe that curriculum should be focused on content-rich material, and that students should read and write about information outside of their own personal lives. Broadening one's knowledge base strengthens reading comprehension, builds vocabulary, and deepens knowledge of the world, all of which help students understand the text, but also, as E. D. Hirsch writes, “what the text implies but doesn't say.”

What has not been openly questioned is the assumption that Calkins has retained her ordinal stance, that it is the teacher's job to midwife a child's own, often richly imaginative voice, rather than impose her own. Calkins's program originally gained its popularity, at least in part, because of its mission to help children make their distinct voices heard. She was known as a champion for flexible, creative teaching, uniquely attuned to children. “If we adults listen and watch closely,” she wrote in 1986, “our children will invite us to share their worlds and their ways of living in the world.” And while this impulse continues to inform aspects of her approach, she has tended over time to become increasingly focused on enforcing her own methodology; many of her techniques limit children's genuine engagement with reading and writing. This insistence on only one way to do things, not surprisingly, has translated into a demand that teachers quiet their own impulses, gifts, and experiences, and speak in one, mandated voice.

Recently, Common Good, a bipartisan organization committed to “restoring common sense to American law” asked New York City public school teachers to keep a diary

fundamentally a “social activity.” “The books that matter in our lives are the books we have discussed.” Or “It takes two to read a book.” She relays approvingly how a teacher asks kindergartners who are enjoying a book, “But where are your tools, your logs, your Post-its?”

Rarely are children invited to simply sink into a story and experience it emotionally. In fact, when an unguarded emotion occurs while a teacher is reading aloud, it is perceived as a unique, nearly baffling event. Calkins relates approvingly how a teacher, while reading the very moving book *The Hundred Dresses* by Eleanor Estes to a group of six-year-olds, noticed a boy whose “facial expression showed how Peggy felt as she stood by and watched her classmate Wanda being taunted. ‘Oh my goodness,’ [the teacher] said to the class when she saw what Robert was doing, ‘Let me keep reading and all of you watch the way Robert's face shows what Peggy was feeling.’ Soon everybody was following Robert, supplying the facial expressions and gestures to match the interpretations of Peggy's mood.”

Yet Calkins herself, in the middle of *The Art of Teaching Reading*, describes with some derision two 2nd-grade students using jargon to discuss a book. She hears them say that they are making “text-to-self” connections, and “text-to-text” connections, phrases they'd obviously been taught to use. When she asks them what they are referring to and their response is flimsy, she concludes that all their jargon is much ado about nothing. “If anything,” she muses, “the long metacognitive detour had probably pulled these readers out of ‘the virtual dream’ of the story, and broken the spell of the enchantment.” Apt words, indeed.

Planning the Writer's Conference

The Calkins tome *One to One: The Art of Conferring with Young Writers* (2005) is the result of 18 months of poring over transcripts of her own and her protégés' conferences with very young children, in an attempt to extrapolate their own "best teaching moves." The goal is then to refine those moves, sort them into categories, and write scripts to accompany them. Calkins has managed to bring the whole unwieldy world of teaching writing into neat, snap-on categories. There are four phases for conducting a conference: the research phase (to last no longer than two minutes), in which the teacher assesses what she or he will teach the young writer; the decision phase, in which the teacher decides what kind of conference (there are four kinds) to implement; a teaching phase; and, finally, a link phase, which involves extracting an oath from the child. "From this day on, for the rest of your life," the teacher asks the child to pledge, "are you always going to remember to do X when you write?"

Calkins instructs teachers to give two compliments during their conferences with students, one at the beginning and one at the end, and to "briefly record what you have complimented in a box containing the child's name." The *Conferring* CD-ROM comes with a letter from Calkins that advises teachers to "study the compliment section in every conference. What do you see us doing over and over again? Compare the way we tend to give compliments and the way you have done this. By doing this, you will be able to create your own Guide to Giving Powerful Compliments."

While the idea of meeting one-on-one with a child to discuss his work might suggest spontaneous communication between two people, conferences as described by Calkins have a prepackaged, often manipulative quality. She writes, "One effective strategy for buoying a writer's identity is to tell the child he or she has written just like a professional writer." She suggests saying, "You're trying to do something you've seen another

author do. That's so professional of you!" Calkins reports proudly how well a member of her staff intervened when two kindergarteners were squabbling over Magic Markers: "Writers...do not wrestle over markers. Can you imagine Mem Fox or Tomie DiPaola wrestling over markers?"

Another approach brings a similar result. "We try the technique of pretending that the child has been doing exactly what we hoped he or she would do," Calkins explains. "I help Olivia see that her experience is a story that has a beginning, a middle, and an end," she writes, describing a "successful" conference she had with a child about a drawing. "I condense her long explanation of her picture into a tighter narrative line that is within her reach of being able to write. But I do this acting as if she's done all the work herself, and she willingly believes that all I've just done is to restate the story she invented. When we assist a writer, it is often helpful if the writer is fooled into thinking she's done the job herself!"

for 10 days and consider specifically "how bureaucracy impacts everyday teaching." The results were presented in a town hall-style meeting attended by more than a hundred educators and union representatives. One of the topics was "mandated teaching," which referred specifically to the required presence of Calkins and Teachers College in city schools. The responses were almost universally negative.

This entry from a teacher's diary is typical: "Administrators expect all our reading and writing workshops to adhere to an unvarying and strict script....For example: 'Writers, today and everyday you should remember to revise your writing by adding personal comments about the facts.' Sometimes I feel like I'm a robot regurgitating the scripted dialogue that's expected of us day in and day out."

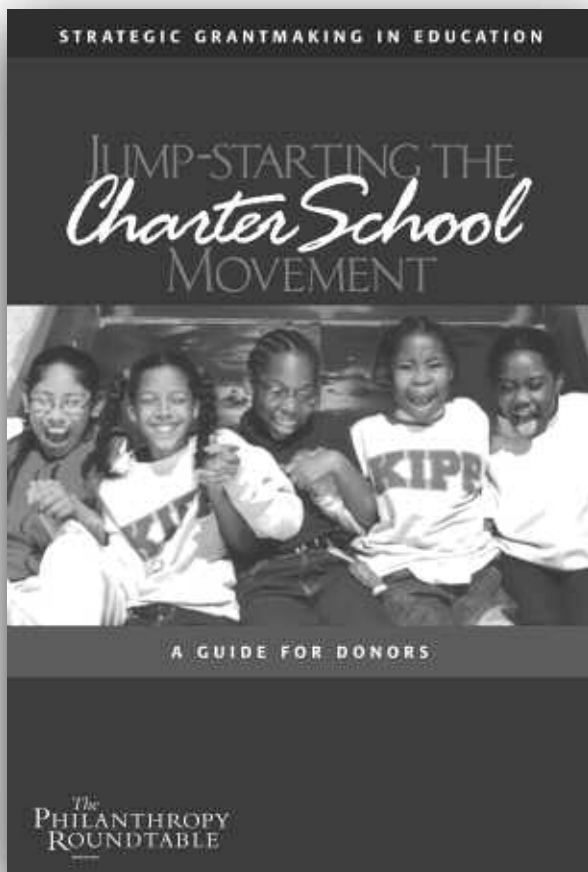
A kindergarten teacher reported how she was instructed to ask her students, on the third day of class, "to reflect on how

they'd grown as writers." She explained that the children were still preoccupied with missing their mothers and felt the assignment was "ridiculous."

The truth is there isn't one way to teach writing, or a limited number of ways to have conversations with children about their imaginative work and their lives. Calkins would have done well to heed the counsel of Donald Murray, whose prescient caution she quotes in *The Art of Teaching Reading*: "Watch out lest we suffer hardening of the ideologies. Watch out lest we lose the pioneer spirit which has made this field a great one."

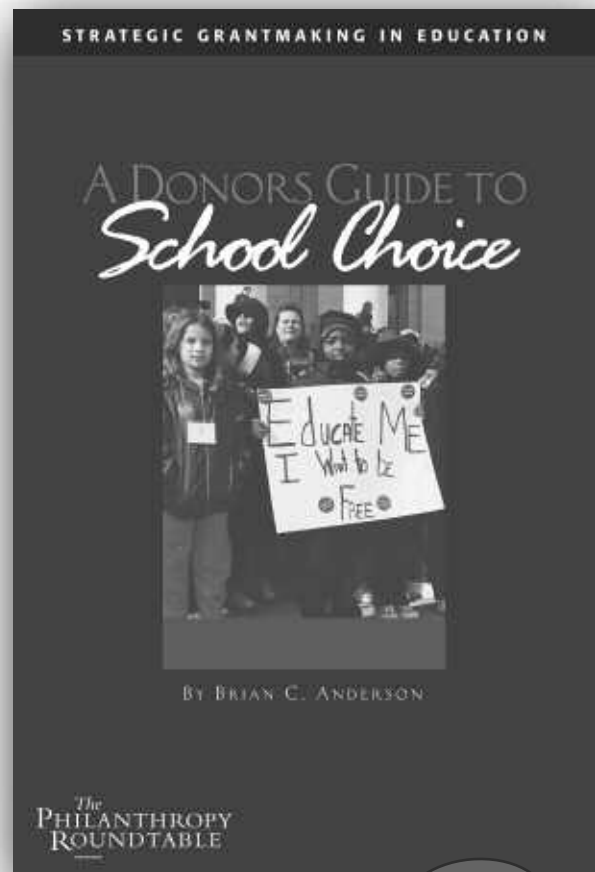
Barbara Feinberg is a freelance writer whose work has appeared in such publications as the New York Times and the Boston Globe. She is the author of Welcome to Lizard Motel: Protecting the Imaginative Lives of Children, Beacon Press, 2005.

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