

Read + Write Lab = New Skills and Successes



Sam Hosch meets with English teacher Sarah Ritzenthaler for his individual writing conference, while classmates Elle Klein, Noemi Tica and Veronica Rodriguez read the books they selected for their Read + Write Lab.

Teachers are students too – students of what works best for those they teach. For sixth grade English teacher Sarah Ritzenthaler, one of the biggest lessons came when she attended a series of conferences on effective ways to teach reading and writing.

“Many things I thought about teaching English were challenged,” she said, “and what really resonated was the importance of choice – that kids learn critical, higher-order thinking when given the responsibility of selecting and choosing for themselves what they read and write about, and by having a dialogue with their teacher about their choices.”

Sarah put her new knowledge to work this past January by setting up the Read + Write Lab in the Webber Learning Lodge, a stand-alone outdoor classroom on the Visitation property with comfortable seating and lots of natural light. Half of each class period was spent reading, and the other half writing.

Students arrived rosy-cheeked after a quick walk to Webber. After a warm welcome and brief mini-lesson on topics like prewriting strategies, adding action to dialogue, using flashback, slowing down the hot spot, etc., the scholars were sent off to their respective labs for reading or writing.

The books for Read Lab came from students’ homes, public libraries and the Vis Library, plus a collection of 50 or so books that Sarah supplied. Students read new and coming authors and old favorites from a wide array of books, including science fiction, realistic fiction, narrative fiction, historic fiction and much more.

While reading, students noticed what was interesting to them, then stopped to think about it and jot it down. During subsequent reading conferences with Sarah, the students would compile their observations, track them and finally synthesize them in writing, a graphic organizer or timeline that illustrated extension and reflection on their part.

Choice within structure was key. “Students are more engaged when they have the opportunity to choose what they study or focus on,” Sarah pointed out. “Learning critical thinking and literary analysis by reading something they are interested in doesn’t seem like work. I want them to read not just to ride the roller coaster that a book can be, but also to start to see the design of the roller coaster, the physics, what the ‘engineer’ had in mind.”

In Write Lab, each student created and revised a narrative fiction piece over the course of six weeks, choosing the topic, format and place of eventual publication. Students shared their drafts with each other in writers’ groups and with Sarah for feedback. In the end, students wrote short stories, novellas, picture books, choose-your-own adventure interactive stories, narrated videos and podcasts.

“We had five students upload their original stories (read by the author) as podcasts, and we also had students submit their work to magazines as well as the classroom blog.” Sarah noted proudly that several of the students declared this was the first of many stories they would write and publish.

“Read + Write Lab teaches students to generate valid ideas on their own,” Sarah concluded. “This isn’t a worksheet – it’s raw thinking. The students owned this unit, both in process and product, and that was reflected in their enthusiasm, engagement and overall achievement.”



Catherine Larson, Mikayla O’Connell, Elle Klein and Emma Wussow relax with good books.



Catherine Larson composes in the warm sunshine of the Webber Learning Lodge.

In their own words

Being able to read and write what I want was awesome because I wasn’t ever bored.

- Ella Passe

I like that the teacher is there to guide, but we get to choose our own path.

- Eric Zauha

Read + Write Lab gave me a chance to think about what I read. It also helped me develop editing and dialogue skills.

- Maryeva Gonzalez

I like the idea of switching from reading to writing halfway and the mini-lesson at the beginning. I also really like that it is in the Webber Lodge. It’s really cool to learn outside the classroom.

- Mikayla O’Connell

Samples of the students’ writing can be accessed by parents on the class webpage. Others are invited to contact Mrs. Ritzenthaler or visit *Adobe Spark, Kid Blog, SoundCloud, Story Jumper* or *Inkewriter*.