

THE WRITING WORKSHOP AS A STUDENT-CENTRED APPROACH: STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

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The paper examines the *Writing Workshop*, a process-oriented approach to teaching writing, in the context of Italian middle schools. This method, which emerged in the 1970s in the U.S. (Murray, 1972; Calkins, 1983), emphasises writing as a process and focuses on autonomy, student agency and teacher support. In recent years, it has also gained importance in Italy (Poletti-Riz, 2017). The adaptation of the method is analysed, as well as *Writing Workshop*'s adherence to an authentic student-centred approach (Starkey, 2019). The main strengths of the method and the challenges of its implementation in the Italian context are analysed based on teachers' opinions on the subject and theoretical consideration. The paper concludes that while the *Writing Workshop* has significant potential, its success depends on thoughtful integration, teacher readiness to implement it, and ongoing research. Further research is recommended to evaluate its long-term effectiveness in Italian schools.

Writing Workshop; student-centred; strengths; weaknesses; Italian middle-school.

INTRODUCTION

Writing is more than a technical skill, it is a powerful tool for personal expression, communication, and the development of critical thinking (Klein et al., 2014; Alber-Morgan et al., 2007). Traditional approaches to writing instruction have often focused on the final product, neglecting the iterative and reflective nature of the writing process itself (Lo Duca, 2013). Since the 1970s, cognitive process-oriented methods have been developed and refined, particularly in the U.S, which then became popular in other parts of Europe. Among these approaches, the *Writing Workshop*, an explicit and student-centred approach, has become well-known in Italy in the last ten years. This

paper therefore examines the *Writing Workshop* in the Italian context, especially in middle school, and analysis its adaptation as a *traveling library* (Popkewitz, 2005): in fact, the approach is adapted and tailored to a different time and space than it was originally developed. How the different aspects can work together is further analysed; moreover, the paper describes how the method can be reckoned a student-centred approach (Starkey, 2019; Tatal & Yazar, 2022). Furthermore, it provides a critical overview of the strengths and challenges of this approach in Italian middle schools, considering both the theoretical foundations and the practical real-world applications. In this way, this text aims to offer insights to educators who wish to introduce or further develop the *Writing Workshop* in Italian educational contexts.

1. THE BACKGROUND OF THE WRITING WORKSHOP

1.1 The Writing Workshop roots

Since the 1970s, the increasing recognition of cognitivism in teaching in the U.S. has also influenced teaching of writing. Donald Murray's essay "*Teach writing as a process, not product*" (1972) was one of the first suggestions to teach writing in a *workshop* mode: the assumption is to teach "unfinished writing" through a process of discovery of writing practice in which the student is the director of his or her own writing and learning. Students are thus seen as apprentices, experimenting with the written text and words through *trial-and-error*, according to their own time and needs. Emig (1971) explicitly described how the various processes involved in continuous, reiterative writing by twelfth graders take place, distinguishing prewriting, planning, starting, composing aloud, reformulating, stopping and contemplating the final product.

Later, cognitivist researchers detailed the writing processes: Hayes and Flower's (1980) model is the first pioneering contribution. The authors identified the processes of planning, translating and revising, as well as the influence of the task environment and long-term memory on composition. Further on, Bereiter and Scardmalia (1987) distinguished the difference between *knowledge-telling* and *knowledge-transforming*: these two developmental models helped to elaborate an evolutionary concept of writing skills; the ability to look back critically at the writing product – in an iterative process perspective – is, as they define it, a central aspect of good mastery of written composition, as is the ability to consider a communicative goal. To help students manage all the cognitive activities implied in writing, the authors introduce the concept of *procedural facilitators*, cognitive strategies designed to simplify or support the

writing activity by breaking writing into small parts.

Based on these premises, various cognitive methods of writing instruction developed in the United States, ranging from strictly cognitivist approaches, in which the learner uses graphic organisers to reduce cognitive load (SRSD program, Harris, 1982; Harris & Graham, 1992; CSIW, Englert et al. 1991), to process-oriented approaches. Among these approaches, the *Writing Workshop* promoted by Lucy Calkins is the one that emerged from the early of Donald Murray. The method became well known in the American and Anglophone context after Calkins founded a research center called the “Teachers College Reading and Writing Workshop” at the College of British Columbia University in 1981. In her first book *Lessons from a Child* (1983), she describes the application of the *Writing Workshop* in her teaching practice. In *The Art of teaching Writing* (1986), she then attempts to systematise her experiences by suggesting that the *Writing Workshop* should be used in schools from a very young age. In the same years, Nancy Atwell (*In the middle*, 1987) also supports the workshop approach in schools as an effective method for teaching writing skills from primary school onwards. Both link writing instruction to reading, particularly so that students have examples of good texts to model, draw inspiration from, or refer to, which is close to some aspects of the genre-based approach to writing. Both focus on the processes involved in writing, from initial planning, drafting, revising, evaluating, and publishing of the final product. Calkins focused primarily on writing; in later years, she attempted to embed reading instruction in the same *workshop* method (Calkins & Cunningham, 2000), which has always been the weakest link in the *Reading and Writing Workshop*. Scientific research has highlighted the gaps of the method, especially in terms of learning phonology and phonetics and learning vocabulary (Adams et al., 2020; American Institutes for Research, 2021); at the same time, the method seems to have been successful in 4th and 5th grade, especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Figge & Sass, 2021). Despite the limitations pointed out, her method has become known and famous in the U.S. and beyond, and in recent years has also become increasingly important in Italy.

1.2 The Writing Workshop in the Italian context

In Italy in the sixties, the practice of writing that focused on the process was initially carried out in an informal way. One of the first documented experiences on this subject is the practice of writing in the Barbiana school by Don Milani and his students (Milani & Scuola di Barbiana, 1967). The collective generation of ideas and the processual writing approach were closely linked to having a strong

theme relevant to the students, which they could choose according to the importance of the theme for themselves. It was a means of denouncing injustice and demanding a school connected to real challenges. Later, the GISCEL (Group of Intervention and Study in the Field of Linguistic Education) published their manifesto (1975) in which they argued for a model of linguistic education that was more student-centred and less focused on traditional, meaningless products for written instruction. They also emphasize the importance of allowing learners to experiment with words, in a processual perspective of writing (and speaking). The practice of writing teaching in Italian schools shows an increasing influence of the cognitivist approach, first thanks to the studies by Boscolo (1990) and later by Cisotto (2006; Cisotto & Gruppo RDL, 2015). Nevertheless, the *Writing Workshop* didn't become known under this specific name until 2017, when Poletti-Riz wrote the first book on this method in order to disseminate it. Since then, many other teachers or researchers have adopted this approach (there is even a website that groups teachers together under the name "Italian Writing Teachers"¹), and other manuals for teachers have been published (Pognante & Ramazzotti, 2022, 2024; Pellacani & Verziaggi, 2023; Poletti Riz & Turrini, 2024). Originally, Poletti-Riz and colleagues suggested using the *Writing Workshop* mainly in middle school, when students should have already developed the basic skills of writing (the graphomotor and linguistic foundations; Vio et al. 2012); only in recent years these authors suggested using it in primary school (Dicati & Vaudagnotto, 2024). After the first publications, the group "Italian writing teachers" proposed to apply the method to learning to read, and it is now also adopted by many school publishers (e.g. Sanoma). We argue here that the reading method is slightly different from the method proposed by Calkins, as it is influenced by or merged with other methods such as reading aloud (*lettura ad alta voce*; Batini, 2022). These traveling libraries (Popkewitz, 2005) may have taken into account the criticisms leveled at Calkins' original method, or that were critical of its adoption, and incorporated it into a classical didactic tradition of writing with monthly essays in the classroom, where the choice of topic is less flexible (Calkins argues for high flexibility and student choice regarding the topic of the written essays, 2014). The proposal to use the method in Italian schools came at an opportune moment when the context would have been able to embed it in daily practice, also thanks to the strong adherence of the method with the curriculum's description of how written instruction should be conducted (process-oriented). The method is thus

¹ <https://www.italianwritingteachers.it/>, accessed on 10 December 2024.

embedded in a specific context in which previous traditions of writing instruction and *Writing Workshop* merge to create a somewhat different final product.

2. THE STRUCTURE OF THE WRITING WORKSHOP

The *Writing Workshop* is a structured yet flexible model that adapts to different teaching situations, focusing on the writing process. The methodology is based on three interconnected phases —minilessons, writing and conferencing, and reflection and sharing — each of which serves a specific purpose to foster students’ development as writers. It can be adapted to any genre (Calkins, 1986, 2014). The premise is that the structure described below is repeated at many different stages until a final product is completed, and that the teacher breaks down the various processes involved in writing into parts so that students can focus on one stage at a time (consistent with the procedural facilitations mentioned earlier).

2.1 Minilesson

The *Writing Workshop* begins with a mini-lesson: a short, concentrated lesson lasting about 10–15 minutes. During this time, the teacher introduces a specific writing strategy, concept or skill. Examples include techniques for crafting engaging introductions, strategies for effectively organizing ideas, or the mechanics of punctuation in dialog. The minilesson also builds on students’ prior knowledge to make the new content accessible and meaningful.

The key to this phase is its deliberate brevity and clarity. By focusing on a concrete goal, the mini-lesson should avoid overwhelming students and allows them to immediately apply what they have learned to their own writing. This explicit phase of instruction reflects the principles of effective writing instruction (Slavin, 2019; Graham, 2007; Graham et al. 2016) and emphasizes direct instruction.

2.2 Autonomous writing and conferencing

The writing phase accounts for most of the time in the workshop (if a lesson is dedicated to writing, at least half of it will be in this phase) and is the time when learners apply the taught strategy in the minilesson. They plan, draft, revise, edit and publish their work autonomously. During this time, learners work independently or in small groups, experimenting with ideas and refining their texts. Although they work by themselves (which is why this method is especially recommended for middle school, since students can self-regulate and enjoy

this autonomy), a distinctive feature of the *Writing Workshop* is conferencing, where the teacher circulates between students and gives them individual feedback and scaffolding on strategies. These one-on-one interactions, while students are writing independently, allow teachers to address specific challenges, such as help with planning or restructuring paragraphs, while encouraging students to take risks and think critically about their writing, depending on each student's needs. Conferencing allows students to feel supported in their efforts, but also appropriately motivated to write, according to constructivist Vygotsky's (1990) theory of the zone of proximal development.

2.3 Collective reflection and Sharing

The *Writing Workshop* concludes with a reflection and sharing session in which students present excerpts from their work to classmates or the class and critically reflect on the challenges of the new strategy or key insights that students believe could be useful for this purpose. Sharing also fosters a sense of writing, as students see themselves not only as writers but also as part of a larger creative process. Teachers facilitate these sessions by leading the discussions, asking reflective questions and encouraging constructive feedback.

While the basic structure of the *Writing Workshop* remains consistent, its implementation can vary depending on the needs of the class. For example, some teachers may extend the minilesson to cover particularly complex topics, while others may allow more time for conferencing to support struggling students. This adaptability ensures that the workshop remains relevant and effective in different educational contexts.

3. THE WRITING WORKSHOP AS A STUDENT-CENTRED APPROACH

3.1 Student-centred approach: a definition

Aware of the criticisms levelled at student-centred approaches, particularly the policy implications of these approaches (Schweisfurth, 2013), we further define how student-centred is meant in this paper. As Starkey (2019) states, we can recognise three dimensions of student/learner-centred approaches in education:

- (1) Cognitive dimension: the focus is on improving the performance of individual learners (which can be defined in different ways) but is mainly linked to knowledge and skills.

- (2) Student agency dimension: The focus here is on learner empowerment, where each of them feels involved and is actively engaged in their learning, with intention and self-reflection (Bandura, 1986). This means that students and teachers have equal status in a democratic community and students can decide for themselves what they want to learn (or write, for example).
- (3) Humanistic dimension: Taking into account all the different dimensions of learning, from affective aspects to creativity or contextualisation, is the main aspect of the humanistic dimension (with a culturally appropriate pedagogy). From this perspective, learning also encompasses emotional, social and personal development.

In her analysis, Starkey (2019) emphasises that the second dimension is partially embedded in the third dimension, as a learner who is empowered and able to influence their learning process is part of the consideration of the needs of learners and students as human beings as a whole.

We argue here that aligning the student-centred approach with the democratic principles of GISCEL (see above), an integrated vision of the student-centred approach could be beneficial, where achievement is linked to the competent use of writing for communication purposes. Since we do not yet have experimental results in the Italian context, and we are interested in seeing the effects, we advocate that the *Writing Workshop* is a student-centred approach according to the second and third dimensions (results regarding the effectiveness of the method can be found in the U.S. where there is clear evidence especially for explicit instruction, but they are not transferable to a very different context such as the Italian one; Figge & Sass, 2021; Graham et al. 2017; Slavin et al. 2019).

3.2 The Writing Workshop: agency and humanist dimensions

The main aspects that support the *Writing Workshop* as a learner-centred approach are, according to the previous definition, the following:

- **Autonomy and responsibility:** students are responsible for their writing for at least half of the time they spend on writing instruction. At the heart of the *Writing Workshop* is the belief that students should take responsibility for their writing process. In contrast to traditional approaches, where teachers prescribe topics and structures, students in the *Writing Workshop* can choose their own topics and set their own goals. This autonomy fosters a sense of responsibility and investment in

their work and encourages them to engage deeply with the writing process. Research demonstrates the positive effects of student autonomy on motivation (Brooks et al., 2021).

- Personalization: The *Writing Workshop* is inherently adaptable and allows teachers to personalise instruction based on each student's strengths, weaknesses, and interests during conferences. This allows them to provide tailored feedback that addresses specific challenges. This personalisation, as advocated by Tomlinson (2014), ensures that all students, regardless of ability level, can meaningfully participate in the writing process.
- Community of writers: Emphasising collaboration during the final reflection and sharing stage and during the autonomous writing stage (sometimes providing opportunities to talk or write together) encourages the creation of a supportive environment, a sense of democratic community in which students can feel valued and connected. In addition, feedback from classmates allows students to learn from each other's insights and approaches, empowering them and giving them more agency in their interactions with others.
- Emotions and interests: The reflective nature of the workshop during the conference and final reflection, as well as the opportunity to share and collaborate, encourages students to articulate their thoughts and feelings. In addition, the opportunity to make their own choices gives students the chance to act according to their interests. From this point of view, the *Writing Workshop* takes into account that the learner has cognitive, emotional, personal and social needs.

These features of the method contribute to a positive and empowering writing classroom where students are at the centre of the learning process.

4. CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE WRITING WORKSHOP

The above aspects seem very positive on paper, but when put into practice, they can take a different turn. After an in-service training with three teachers from a middle school in Turin, Italy, the *Writing Workshop* was applied in their classrooms. Thanks to collective reflections, participant observation and a focus group, we present here a balance of the strengths and challenges of this approach, especially when applied in a culturally diverse, urban and Italian middle school.

The balance of strengths and weaknesses is thus the result of a review of the

theory-based limitations and the field implications identified in practice. By examining both, educators and researchers can better understand the impact of the approach and refine its implementation.

4.1 Strengths of the Writing Workshop

4.1.1 Fostering Autonomy and Metacognitive Thinking

As has already been emphasised, one of the greatest strengths of the *Writing Workshop* lies in the promotion of autonomy. Students have the freedom to choose their own topics and control their writing process, which promotes their independence and self-regulation. In addition, the *Writing Workshop* encourages critical and metacognitive thinking (Cornoldi et al., 2018) by requiring students to make decisions at each stage of the writing process. For example, during the writing process, students must assess how best to structure their arguments or convey their ideas and whether this is coherent with their originally planned ideas. This iterative decision-making process prompts students to critically evaluate their own work or that of their peers (Guilford, 1967).

4.1.2 Motivation in writing

Autonomy means that learners can be actively involved, which is one of the key components of writing motivation (Hidi & Boscolo, 2006; Piazza & Siebert, 2008). Emphasising choice in the workshop allows students to explore topics that match their interests and experiences (intrinsic motivation, Ryan et al. 2021). In addition, peer feedback can enhance motivation in the form of positive peer feedback, encouragement, and a sense of being able to provide valuable feedback to classmates. During the conferencing, the teacher can also encourage the students so that when they feel supported, they are even more motivated to stick with the task (extrinsic motivation, Ryan et al., 2021).

4.1.3 Internalisation of writing processes

Because the *Writing Workshop* focuses heavily on process-based instruction, from planning to publication, students who are exposed to the method for a long time will eventually become accustomed to the structure and be able to use it confidently. The *Writing Workshop* is indeed a framework that can be applied to different genres (as shown in diverse publications: Pognante & Ramazzotti, 2022, 2024; Poletti Riz & Turrini, 2024).

4.1.4 Personalisation through time, choice and feedback

Learners proceed at their own pace, without time pressure, and have the opportunity to choose their topic: This moves towards a personalised pedagogical setting (Tomlinson, 2014). In addition, the teacher can provide help, support and feedback tailored to the student's needs to make learning more effective given the limited time allotted to writing in Italian schools (Boscolo & Zuin, 2015; Rossi, 2019).

4.1.5 Work on revision

The current practice in Italian schools is to work on writing during the essay lessons dedicated to writing practice, but with students working independently, sometimes following direct guidance on planning and drafting. Lessons on revising the text are often omitted (Boscolo & Zuin, 2015). *Writing workshop* allows teachers to use an appropriate moment in their didactics for intentional revision.

4.2 Challenges of the Writing Workshop

4.2.1 Transferability of the learned techniques

As the method is proposed as a framework for all different genres, it is essential for students to apply the method to all types of writing tasks they might consider in the real world so that they are able to transfer their knowledge to all writing tasks. This is particularly important according to the infusion model (Trincherò, 2022), where students need to focus on the specific content of applying a strategy in order to subsequently apply it competently. With this in mind, the choice of topic – which encourages motivation – should be carefully balanced with the more focused writing topics, taking into account the circumstances. Perhaps this is also the reason why the Italian authors who publish manuals to introduce the *Writing Workshop* into daily classroom practice link each manual to a genre (Pognante & Ramazzotti, 2022, 2024; Poletti Riz & Turrini, 2024).

4.2.2 Demotivation and lack of autonomy

For students to be independent, they need to be trained. Because if we change the whole didactics from one day to the next, which could be more linked to direct teacher-led activities, students might feel lost and not enjoy the autonomy. On the contrary, they might even feel frustrated and demotivated. It is therefore suggested to proceed gradually and give students a little more autonomy time each time so that they learn to cope with it. Writing time may also be underutilised if the explicit instruction or strategy is not well explained or illustrated: Learners may feel confused and lost in the task.

4.2.3 Identification of personal needs, providing feedback and teacher preparation

If students do not gradually learn to deal with the open-ended nature of the method, there is a risk that students who have difficulties with self-regulation or self-confidence, for example, may feel overwhelmed by the freedom to choose their topics or direct their own learning. The feeling of being alone and perhaps lost in the face of writing could lead to students asking lots of questions and seeking help from the teacher, who can easily feel overwhelmed with all the requests. It is therefore crucial that teachers are well prepared to implement the method in the usual didactics that students are used to, that they are culturally and contextually sensitive before putting the method into practice. They also need to be aware of their students' needs, from the socio-emotional support learners need to the challenges each student has in writing. Educators should be prepared to be flexible to learners' needs in order to respond to them effectively.

In Italy, the school system is inclusive, so that students with disabilities can also come into contact with the method. The flexibility of the *Writing Workshop* is crucial for these students. At the same time, students who have great difficulty with writing should be supported through personalised methods where writing can be replaced by oral narration. While the method itself is inclusive, it does not go as far in terms of flexibility: this is the space where classroom practise is challenged by creativity to find tailored and different means of communication to meet the needs of individual students.

4.2.4 Difficult to implement in the "traditional" practice

In connection with the last weakness, the difficulty of introducing the new method in daily practise is a real challenge. A middle school teacher (female, 43 years old) in a urban school in Turin explains:

One weakness that I notice is that the Writing Workshop has a structure, it is a method, and like all methods it offers involvement in a framework, a framework with its own meaning, which gives value and makes you understand that if you start from there, you arrive there because you follow a whole process, which is in a way a process (...) a bit armoured... So that means that the structure of the week: (...) the hours that are dedicated to reading, the hours that are dedicated to writing.... You have to (...) distort in an important way what your habit is in order to organise the weekly structure of the hours of writing. (...) The risk I have encountered, I mean, the fear I have encountered, is that if I change everything without knowing exactly what I am going to do, I will mess everything up.

As she clearly states, the introduction of the method must be prepared, can be gradual (it is preferable if the students are used to a different kind of approach), but with the knowledge of what the target point is. Without a critical and clear analysis of the teaching context in which we want to introduce the *Writing Workshop*, there is a great risk of being superficial or losing the purpose.

4.2.5 Time consuming

Compared to traditional didactics, teachers who use the *Writing Workshop* state that it is much more time-consuming. This is indeed related to the nature of the workshop itself: the process-oriented approach requires longer periods of time for planning, drafting, revising and conferencing. In schools with tight schedules, it can be difficult to find enough time for these activities, and without adequate time there is a risk that the workshop will become fragmented, undermining its effectiveness.

5. CONCLUSION

Writing Workshop, rooted in process-oriented pedagogy, offers a student-centred approach to writing instruction. It emphasizes learner ownership and iterative improvement, allowing learners to take responsibility for their writing process. However, as with any pedagogical method, its successful implementation requires an attentive awareness and understanding of its strengths and limitations.

In order to assess the actual effectiveness of the method in Italian schools, it is crucial to understand the implementation of the *Writing Workshop* in the Italian context: further research is needed, as the balance between strengths and weaknesses here is based on teachers' impressions and theoretical analysis, – which are very relevant but cannot be the only evaluation criterion. Before advocating the incorporation of process-oriented methods such as the *Writing Workshop* in teacher education and training, it is essential to evaluate their effectiveness at national level (by experimenting several times and listening to the experiences and impressions of numerous teachers). At the same time, teachers who want to experiment with *Writing Workshop* in their classrooms should undergo professional development through reading, confrontation with peers, courses, etc., in order to be prepared for a correct and not a-critical implementation of the method (Murtonen et al., 2024).

As for the strengths of the method, these are anchored in the main features of the method itself, which, when implemented and applied as intended, can truly

promote writing learning and metacognitive writing skills (Cornoldi et al. 2018) throughout the writing process. It can also support students' agency and empowerment and have a positive impact on students' whole school experience. Furthermore, it can effectively promote the democratic language education that the GISCEL group supports and which is highlighted in the national curriculum for language education (MIUR, 2012). Personalising teaching and learning and fostering motivation are key to promoting students' writing proficiency and passion.

The challenges are not negligible: the difficulties in the transferability of the strategies learned and in the implementation of the *Writing Workshop* in Italian classrooms are the main aspects that teachers, book authors and school publishers should pay attention to. Teachers, schools, and curriculum designers should really consider and extend the time devoted to writing exercises: results regarding students' written productions are not encouraging (Prada, 2009, 2020, 2021).

In conclusion, we recommend that teachers who find the *Writing Workshop* nowadays embedded in their textbooks to adopt it critically, and only after having thoroughly studied the principles of the method themselves. Otherwise, the risks mentioned above have a greater chance of becoming a reality in their classrooms. Collaborative networks such as the "Italian Writing Teachers", where educators share good practices and challenges, can further promote the dissemination of the *Writing Workshop* and advocate for research into the method in schools.

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