

# WORKSHOP HELP DESK

A QUICK GUIDE TO  
**Boosting English Acquisition  
in Choice Time**  
**K-2**

ALISON PORCELLI AND  
CHERYL TYLER

**Workshop Help Desk Series**

Edited by Lucy Calkins

*with the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project*



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*For Tom Porcelli, who always  
believes in me. Thank you for your  
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*—Alison*

*For Dylan, whose passion has  
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*—Cheryl*





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## CHAPTER ONE

# *Choice Time in a Workshop Structure*

Anna, Cahle, Brianna, and Samuel, four ELLs at various stages of language proficiency, had just finished their dramatization of Paul Galdone's *Three Billy Goats Gruff* (1981) with a robust "Snip, snap, snout, and this tale's told out." They'd heard their teacher, Nery Pedraza, read this classroom favorite dozens of times. Their interpretation was impressive; in her role of the troll, Anna's face contorted as she clenched her fists and in a deep baritone roared, "Who's walking over my bridge?" As the group was cleaning the drama station and getting ready to gather on the rug, Anna paused and said to the others, "He always mad. He mean."

Cahle responded, "Let's do it again and be a nice troll." The children grinned and nodded in anticipation.

Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky said, "In play, a child is always above his average age, above his daily behavior; in play,

it is as though he were a head taller than himself” (Vygotsky 1978, 102). When Anna remarks about the trolls consistent meanness and Cahle suggests that the story could be reimagined, this time with a nice troll rather than a mean one, these children are allowing stories to be elastic. They are noticing patterns in a story and realizing that the story could have unfolded differently.

Teachers across America are increasingly being asked to develop teaching plans that are differentiated enough that every child in a class is able to function as an active, engaged learner. When many members of the class do not speak English, it is not always easy for teachers to know how to summon those children out of the margins of the classroom. Teachers who cannot speak a child’s first language are not always sure how to reach the ELL, and equally important, they are not always sure how to help ELLs become socialized into the dynamics of a classroom. This book suggests that the choice time centers that were once a mainstay in so many early childhood classrooms can provide teachers with a developmentally appropriate way to engage all ELLs and to support their language development.

## **What, Exactly, Does the Phrase *Choice Time Workshop* Mean?**

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The phrase *choice time* refers to the portion of a day when children are allowed to work in areas of choice. Some early childhood educators are more blunt, calling this “play time,” and some mask the prevalent activity, referring to this as “centers.”

The label for this time is not important, but the fact that children have a chance to work (or play) with blocks, art materials, and drama is crucial. Increasingly, children do not have opportunities at home to make castles out of blocks or to cackle like a witch while casting a spell. Many children spend six hours a day watching television, and when they are not plugged into the television, children are plugged into the ipod, the computer, or the video game. “Our children,” Bill Moyers has said, “are being raised by appliances.”

Choice time is crucial, but this book aims to make a case not just for choice time but for a choice time *workshop*. This phrase—*choice time workshop*—implies not only that children are invited to play with blocks and construct art projects but also that this time adheres to the structures of workshop teaching. Lucy Calkins, the founding director of the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project at Columbia University, compares the structure of workshop teaching to that of a pottery class. In most pottery classes, the instructor starts out by convening the artists to share a point, to provide a demonstration. Then all the art students disperse to their various workstations and each resumes work on his or her pottery, picking up where he or she left off. As the pottery students work on their sculptures, they use not only the new technique that the teacher demonstrated that day but also other pottery techniques that they’ve been taught on previous days. The instructor, meanwhile, moves among the workers, observing, assessing, coaching, and sometimes convening small groups that need similar instruction. At the end of the workshop, the instructor might reconvene the group to share a technique that one or two members of the class tried that day.

Many teachers teach reading and writing within a structure not unlike a pottery workshop. Teachers begin reading and writing workshops with a short minilesson in which they demonstrate a particular teaching point, and then the students disperse to delve into their ongoing and important reading or writing work. As children read or write, they draw on what they have learned that day and on previous days. As children work, the teacher confers with individuals and leads small groups to provide responsive, differentiated instruction. The workshop closes with a brief teaching share—this is a time when the teacher highlights something that one person did during the workshop that could benefit all the others.

Teachers who teach choice time through a workshop structure find there are many advantages to such a structure, and those advantages are as important for children who are working with clay or blocks as for children who are working with written words and illustrations. Perhaps most importantly, workshop teaching allows children to work for long stretches of time, pursuing their own wonderful ideas. Years ago, Donald Graves described the elementary school curriculum as a “cha-cha” curriculum, with children spending five minutes on one thing, seven minutes on the next. “Take it out,” the teacher says, and then says, “Put it away.”

Workshops—whether reading workshops, writing workshops, or choice time workshops—are designed to provide learners with long chunks of time so that they have the opportunity to plan, to construct, to revise, and to share work. The nature of that work will be different depending on whether this is a choice time workshop, a writing workshop, or a reading workshop, but in all three instances, learners are

given long stretches of time to carry on with some independence. In a choice time workshop, children stay in their center for at least that one day's workshop and eventually for several days. This is not a small accomplishment. Before structuring choice time into a workshop format, many of our students used to bounce from blocks to art to drama and back to blocks. For example, Matthew would start a painting in the art station and then leave his unfinished work while he ran to the block station to knock down a structure. By the time others heard the commotion in the block area and gathered to investigate, Matthew had already moved on to the game area. If Matthew were working within a choice time workshop, once he or his teacher had channeled him into one kind of exploration, Matthew would be expected to pursue that exploration for at least a day, if not for several days.

Although choice time workshops provide children with opportunities for extended independent work, these workshops also provide children with explicit instruction from a teacher who intervenes to demonstrate and scaffold skills that children need. These skills and strategies are then put to use on students' own important projects. All of this happens in a sea of talk. Children confer with a teacher, and they work in partnerships and small groups.

Many teachers wonder about the notion that children's work with blocks and drama be part of a structured instructional time. "Children have such a structured day already; can't we let their play be unstructured?" they often ask. This is a wise question, but ultimately, blocks, art, and drama provide these young children (and especially young ELLs) with such important learning opportunities that teachers imply can't

miss out on the chance to teach into this important work. The following chart illustrates the structure of a typical choice time workshop:

<b>Minilesson (5 minutes)</b>
Minilessons in choice time workshops follow the same architecture as minilessons in reading and writing workshops. The teacher names and demonstrates one thing she hopes children learn to do as they work on their projects. The children receive scaffolded practice doing whatever the teacher has taught. Sometimes that practice involves a few minutes of work with a partner. Before children disperse at the end of the minilesson, the teacher restates what it is that she hopes children have learned.
<b>Independent Work Time (25–35 minutes)</b>
During work time, children work independently or collaborative work on a project the child authors or coauthors. Some children will have invented a project for themselves to pursue in art, others meanwhile will be making a project on blocks. Different stations allow children to represent their thinking in different ways and to draw on multiple sign systems to do so.
<b>Teaching Share (3–5 minutes)</b>
After the work time, children reconvene back at the carpet. Often the teacher highlights something that she saw in one of the stations that either further illustrates or extends her teaching point.

## The Minilesson

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In a writing workshop, one child might be writing about skating and another child, about a birthday party. The teacher, meanwhile, convenes the whole class to teach a minilesson that will be applicable to all the varied work that children are pursuing. Similarly, in the choice time workshop, a teacher needs to teach minilessons that pertain across the various do-

mains. For example, the teacher might teach children about the value of planning, suggesting children do this whether they are making a house out of pipe cleaners or a spaceship out of a cardboard box. There are countless lessons that a teacher could teach that are equally applicable across the array of choice time centers. Teachers could teach children to talk to each other about their plans and, specifically, to monitor for sense while participating in these conversations by saying to each other, when necessary, “I don’t understand what you are saying. Could you find another way to show me what you mean?” Teachers could teach children that whatever they are doing, they can always use books as a resource. Even children who cannot read conventionally can learn from many non-fiction sources because most of them contain lots of illustrations. These and other minilessons, then, can pertain across domains, so that block builders, artists, and dramatists all profit from the teacher’s instruction.

In choice time workshops, minilessons are patterned after the lessons in *Units of Study for Primary Writing* (Calkins et al. 2003). In those minilessons, the teacher convenes children for about ten minutes. The first minute or two of the minilesson is a time to gather children’s attention, to contextualize today’s lesson, and to teach children a skill or a strategy that they can use many days on their ongoing work projects.

For example, I (Alison) recently began a minilesson by calling the children over to the carpet and saying to them, “Thinkers, during the reading workshop we have been learning that it helps if reading partners take a second to plan how our partnership reading time will go. Rather than diving right into reading, you have been having a quick conversation to

plan. You not only plan how you'll read, you also plan how you'll work with another person. Planning is important not only before we read but also before we work with blocks or with an art project or with almost anything. Before you get started on almost anything, it helps to think, 'How will this work go?' and more specifically, to think, 'How will I work with other people on this?'"

"This means that before you get started working during choice time today and every day, you'll want to turn to others who will be working alongside you and ask, 'What do you want to work on?' Then, just like in reading workshop, you can decide what you'll do first so that you can work together on whatever you decide upon."

Turning to a student, I said, "So let's pretend that Brandon is in the block station with me. Before we start building, I am going to say to him, 'Let's plan how we will work together. What do you want to work on?' and after responding, he may ask me the same question. You'll see that we'll decide together how we will get started. Watch me."

Shifting into the demonstration portion of this minilesson, I invited Brandon up to help me teach and said, "Hi, Brandon. Let's plan. What do you want to work on today?"

Brandon replied, "Building a castle."

Then I whispered to Brandon that he might want to ask me, "What do you want to work on?" and he did just that.

I replied, "I want to build a dinosaur city." Then we talked through whether to start with one idea or the other and ended up deciding to start with Brandon's idea to build a castle.

Stepping back to help students reflect on that interaction, I said, “So did you see how Brandon and I asked each other what we wanted to work on, and when we had two good possibilities before us, we chose one as the starting point? You can do the same thing.” This ended the teaching section of my minilesson.

Then, to give children a few minutes of practice with this, I instructed station partners to turn to each other and ask, “What do you want to work on today?” As children held these conversations, I circulated among them.

After a moment, I reconvened the class and highlighted what a couple of kids had said and then closed with a reminder: “So from now on, remember that when you are working with others, it is wise to plan and one important part of planning involves deciding how the two or three of you will work together. Who will do which jobs? You need to take time to plan what you will do first, then next.”

Then I sent off members of one station and then another; children moved swiftly from the carpet area to their station so as to not waste any time.

## Independent Work

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In the block station during a choice time workshop, children might work together to build a car garage. Perhaps Anthony and Jason are trying to make the structure really tall, but it keeps falling down. The two boys work zealously, testing different alternatives for rebuilding and repairing the structure.

When they finally get the structure to stand, Anthony might make a sign with black marker, “keep up” (keep up), and then he might tape this sign to the structure, hoping in this way that no one will knock it down the next day.

A different section of the room might have been transformed into the drama station. The cluster of children in this station are pretending they are at a restaurant. One child is the waiter, another, the cook, and a third, is sitting at the telephone with a blank book in hand, furiously scribbling down phone orders.

In the art station, a big piece of butcher block paper is rolled out on the table. Children are working on different sections, painting what looks like a giant dinosaur.

This view of a choice time workshop will reveal that children are working (or perhaps the better word is *playing*) with engagement. Looking deeper, though, it is obvious that this is hardly a laissez-faire situation. The teacher is there, too, and she moves quickly from one station to another, listening in and intervening to coach learners to tackle more ambitious work.

When the teacher moves among learners in a choice time workshop, she’s doing what teachers always do: observing, assessing, coaching, demonstrating, and extending. It is hard to overemphasize the importance of assessment. During choice time workshops, teachers have the chance to see children working in settings that may not, to the children, feel academic. How important it is for the teacher to collect language samples of ELLs’ talk. How important it is, too, for teachers to serve as language models for ELLs, talking with kids about

what they are doing and then giving them the language that surrounds their actions.

In choice time workshops, as in reading and writing workshops, independent work time is brought to a close by the teacher convening children for a brief share session. After hearing the signal that conveys the message “clean up,” children put away their materials and gather in the meeting area for what is often referred to as a *teaching share* because the teacher often highlights an example of student work that could benefit the rest of the class in some way.

## The Teaching Share

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During one day’s share session, the teacher might say to the entire class, “I want to tell you something special that I saw today. Mounaf had scissors that Jessica wanted. Rather than yelling and grabbing, she asked him in a helpful way, ‘Can you share the scissors with me, please?’ and he handed them to her. So we learned from Mounaf and Jessica that if someone has something you want, rather than yelling and grabbing, you can ask in helpful way. You could even add the reasons why you need that thing—Mounaf could have added, ‘I need them to cut out the stars for my crown.’” The teacher could then say, “Pretend your partner has some glue, and you want it. Pretend Partner One has the glue. Partner Two, for just a minute think about why you might need that glue . . . what might you be doing that requires glue? Now Partner Two, tell your partner what you’d like, and why. Be sure to add your reasons.”

## A Curriculum Made Up of Units of Study

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In reading and writing workshops, although every day's reading or writing time is structured in a predictable fashion, the work that children pursue changes across the year. Teachers plan monthlong units of study, and those units help to steer and to inform the work that children do as readers and writers. For example, in a writing workshop, the teacher might plan that for one month, children will write narratives, and for another month, children will write persuasive letters. Similarly, teachers who lead choice time workshops find it is helpful to plan units of study for the entire year.

In some schools, teachers plan at least four and sometimes five or six units of study for their yearlong choice time workshop. This book focuses specifically on Units 1 and 2.

Unit 1: Planning and Pursuing Collaborative Projects

Unit 2: Story Play

Unit 3 and 4: Planning and Inventing Projects Based in Social Studies or Science

Unit 5 and 6: Planning and Inventing Interest-Based Projects