



Unchaperoned Writers

By M. Colleen Cruz

Breaking the Dependence
Habit by Teaching Strategies,
Reducing Scaffolding,
and Creating Community

I remember heading down the hallway toward the front door on my way out to my first high school party, feeling fancy with the sting of Jean Naté Body Splash behind each knee, only to come to a complete stop when I overheard my older brother say to my mom, “Are you really going to let her go to a high school party? Do you know if she’s ready for that? Maybe I should go with her.”

I held my breath and froze so the creaking floorboards wouldn't give up my eavesdropping. My mom answered, "I don't *know* if she's ready. But I'm pretty sure I've taught her all I can about how to handle herself. Now there's only one way to find out. And it doesn't involve a big brother chaperone."

As I loudly rounded the corner and waved good-bye to my family, pretending I hadn't overheard, I reviewed everything my mother had taught me about high school parties. About kids sometimes doing things they shouldn't be doing and that there were ways I could still have fun, while also making the right choices for me. Her list of strategies went on.

As I climbed into the back of my friend's Ford Econoline, I was half terrified about what could happen at this mythical High School Party and half vibrating with anticipation. At the party when my friends dispersed, I put almost all my mother's lessons to good use. I left that party feeling triumphant. I could do this thing—with no grown-ups to watch over me. That feeling of competence, that I had the strategies to make my way in the world, was one of the greatest gifts my mother ever gave me.

I was reminded of that high school triumph recently, as I sat at a table with several fourth-grade teachers, discussing struggles in teaching writing. "I have a lot of students who can do the work, but only when I'm sitting right next to them," one teacher said. A chorus of nods followed.

"What happens when you don't sit next to them?" I asked.

"Nothing."

All at once I remembered Ronald.

Ronald was a student who puzzled me. On one hand, I felt very proud of my work with him and how much he had accomplished. When he first came to my class, he claimed to hate writing. Midway through the year, he published a piece with every class unit, with a big smile, too. Perhaps they weren't the strongest pieces, but they were certainly a huge improvement over years past when Ronald, I had been told, had not written at all. However, it seemed like Ronald would only write if I was sitting next to him at his table or nagging him every five minutes. No teacher nearby, no writing.

It didn't take me long to realize that I had started to make a writer out of Ronald, but one who was dependent on me. And although, theoretically, it was a huge improvement over what Ronald had done

That feeling of competence, that I had the strategies to make my way in the world, was one of the greatest gifts my mother ever gave me.

in the past, and he was strengthening his writing muscles more by writing than by not writing, I also knew that he wasn't growing as a writer unless he could write without me. I was acting like the chaperone my brother had wanted to be, all those years ago at the party, and not at all like my mother, who trusted her own teaching and knew the only way to find out if her lessons stuck was to let me possibly fail.

Unfortunately, Ronald is not the only student, whether as a classroom teacher or as a staff developer, whom I have chaperoned into writing dependency. It's an insidious thing because we teachers feel compelled to ensure a student makes as much progress as he can in his learning, and we are willing to do whatever it takes to make it happen. And, if I'm completely honest, it can feel very good to have a student show marked progress and growth because of my presence, but I knew it was problematic.





Experiment by Mindfully Handing Over the Reins

The first step I believe is the most crucial. It is not so much an action as a stance. We need to assume competence. This was something my teaching partner, Jenifer Taets, taught me years ago. The idea is simple. Before we swoop down to offer students supports, we should see what kids can do independently. As Kristi Mraz, master teacher and coauthor of *A Mindset for Learning* (Heinemann, 2015) has been known to say, “I pretend I can’t use my arms. If I let them try to do everything, it might not be perfect, it will probably be messy, but most kids will figure out how to do a lot more than we think they can.”

Our role is to
equip each child
with tools she
can use as a
writer forever.

Why It Can Stop Us: When Something We Know Is Wrong Feels Right

As anyone who has ever helped a preschooler get ready for school knows, it is so much easier and faster to just put the dang shoe on for her than to let her do it.

And there are few things in this life that feel as good as helping another person. One of the key reasons we became teachers was to help others. So, when we pull up a chair alongside a struggling writer and he produces as we sit shoulder to shoulder, there is something that warms our spirits. And, truthfully, there is and should be space in every writer’s workshop for writing teachers to sit side by side with their students and write with them. We do, however, need to teach them the strategies they need to work more independently.

Recognizing the Opportunity: Our Students Need to Learn Independence While They Still Have a Safety Net

Let’s rethink our perception of support. If we view reduction of support as a way to encourage independence, the transition is easier to make. We know that children need to learn the importance of effort and the power of learning from one’s failures. Our young writers need to experience that uncomfortable butt-in-seat feeling, where writing is challenging but deeply gratifying. Our role is to equip each child with tools she can use as a writer forever. In writing as with many other disciplines, often the best ideas come from the failures. By not letting students fail, we can undermine the very self-confidence we are trying to protect. (My excited-to-be-on-her-own high school self would agree.)

We should assume students can do more, and tell them we believe they can do more than any of us can imagine. After she struggles to the point of frustration, then we can give support until there is no longer frustration and she is back to being appropriately challenged. In such cases, we need the least restrictive, most tailored scaffolding possible, whether access to individual-sized class charts, setting up a partnership, or offering a grammar app that helps the student write with more confidence in technical aspects.

When I was a new teacher, I am embarrassed to admit I used to claim to support my strugglers by handing out graphic organizers. Every student who had a hard time with writing would receive the same graphic organizer. Some students did have trouble with organization, but for others it was a fine-motor issue, still others struggled with generating ideas. So, for one or two kids my scaffolds worked, but for most they did nothing—or even worse, they held writers back. Now I know that if I am going to use scaffolding, I need to make sure it matches the individual student’s needs and still allows her to work at her maximum capacity.

When putting a scaffold in place, we need to plan for how and when to remove it. Scaffolding on buildings and in teaching is meant to be temporary. Just as construction companies put up scaffolding with a time line for removal, we need to do the same. When a child needs a scaffold to support him, we provide what he needs. Whatever the scaffold is—say, a set of sentence frame cards (sentence frames are phrases that start and end sentences to help students give syntax to their content)—when you introduce

OBSTACLE	Possible Temporary Scaffold
Organizing writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction and choice of sequential graphic organizers • Drafting each part or idea on index cards • Oral rehearsal • Color-coding different parts
Starting phrases and sentences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sentence frame cards or a document • Oral rehearsal • Mentor text options
Having ideas to write about	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personalized idea strategy chart • A list of personal go-to topics stored in an easy-to-find place • An inspiration corner with photos, objects, mentor texts that can spark ideas
Physical act of writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choice of writing implements • Use of keyboard and word-processing software • Use of voice recognition software such as Dragon, TalkTyper, or Dictation • Options for writing space and furniture such as standing desks, slant boards, stability ball chairs
Grammar and spelling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual word walls or dictionaries • Access to word processor with instruction in grammar and spell-checker • Use of app to support and teach grammar and spelling such as Word Dynamo, Grammarly, or Co:Writer

it to the child, you might consider saying that you are giving him a tool he will use for a few weeks (or days, or minutes) to help him get stronger at a skill. Then, perhaps to keep yourself honest, set an alarm on your phone to remind you when you should pull the scaffold back a bit, perhaps reducing the sentence frame stack to just the ones the student is not yet using independently, or ones with more sophisticated syntax. Then set another alarm for removing that scaffold, when it's clear the student has integrated certain sentence frames into his writing. That way, even if the student isn't yet ready for the removal, you are reminded that it needs to go eventually.

Of course, not all supports need be temporary. School is a great time to teach interdependence to support independence. After all, once students leave school, their friends and colleagues will most likely support them with their life goals. Therefore, we need to teach students how to work well with their peers. Being able to work well with peers is one of those gifts that keeps on giving. Students don't always know how to do this effectively. You might consider teaching a string of lessons to your students on how to give strong feedback and support to their writing partners.

Final Step: Cautious Trust

The day will come, just like it did for my mother, that you will have taught several strategies that support your students as independent writers, and it will be time to send them off to that party. Just like a teenager, half vibrating with excitement as she heads out to her first high school party, we'll know we've done our work right when they can't wait for us to leave them alone so they can test their mettle. Before you step aside, remind them of what they know and that they can come back to you if they get stuck. Then let them go.

More often than not, they'll be just fine, remembering and applying all you taught them. On occasion, they will not. In that case, simply return to the teaching, polishing old favorites and introducing a few new, so that your students can soon bask in the feeling of writing confidence they so rightfully deserve.

Adapted from *The Unstoppable Writing Teacher* (Heinemann, 2015).
Photography by Nadine Baldasare



M. Colleen Cruz is the author of

The Unstoppable Writing Teacher as well as several other titles for teachers, including *Independent Writing* and *A Quick Guide to Helping Struggling*

Writers. She is also the author of the young adult novel *Border Crossing*, a Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award Finalist.

Colleen was a classroom teacher in general education and inclusive settings before joining the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project where she is Senior Lead Staff Developer. Colleen presently supports schools, teachers, and their students nationally and internationally as a literacy consultant.

To continue to engage with Colleen on this topic, please go to www.heinemann.com/pd/journal.