

Cultivating Writers: Elevate your writing instruction beyond the skills to ignite the will

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[See table of contents](#)

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Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

Cultivating Writers: Elevate your writing instruction beyond the skills to ignite the will

by Anne Elliott and Mary Lynch

Pembroke Publisher (2020), 148 pages

ISBN: 978-1-551-38345-3, eBook ISBN 978-1-551-38946-2

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Cultivating Writers fits nicely with the previous book written by Anne Elliott and Mary Lynch titled *Cultivating Readers* (2017). It is well established that students who read often are usually stronger writers. However, reading alone doesn't make one a good writer. Teaching writing is difficult. It requires students to understand spelling, grammar, form, and function. *Cultivating Writers* is a valuable guide for elementary and intermediate teachers (grades 3 to 8) who are either developing a writing program for the first time or looking for ideas to reenergize their existing approach. This book is not a step-by-step guide to creating a writing program, so readers will have to read carefully to find suggestions and strategies that will fit their classroom and pedagogy.

Elliott and Lynch are concerned with developing writing programs that demonstrate to students that writing is not just another school task to complete. They criticize the Ontario elementary language curriculum, noting that in all the specific writing expectations listed for grades three to eight, none address "student interest and motivation to write" (p. 11). I don't think this observation is unique to the language curriculum. There are no expectations in any other curriculum that address student interest. Their observa-

tion, however, reflects what committed and passionate teachers want: their students to see a subject or activity as intrinsically important and valuable. Elliott and Lynch want students to see themselves as writers who can communicate their ideas and feelings effectively, and they want to inspire teachers to create language programs that are about more than assessing curriculum expectations.

Each chapter addresses what might be considered holistic concerns about writing instruction. Elliott and Lynch do not, for example, outline how a teacher should instruct students in the mechanics of paragraph writing. Instead, the authors address how a teacher should model writing habits for their students, help students use their own lives for writing inspiration, and create a writing-friendly environment in the classroom. Most chapters end with Black Line Masters to help younger students both work through the writing process and begin to see themselves as writers. The authors provide interest inventories, surveys on writing habits, and a "Writing Publication Record" in which students can keep track of the writing pieces they completed during the year.

There are plenty of practical suggestions in this book to help teachers create a writing-positive classroom. Some ideas aren't necessarily new, but the authors provide an interesting twist to old approaches. For example, a board used to display the most recent writing assignment should be a place for students to showcase what they consider to be their best writing to that point. Students can switch out their pieces when they think they've produced something better. Elliott and Lynch also stress the need to give students greater agency in the classroom, allowing them more choice and flexibility in their choice of topic and how they choose to write. They suggest having an "author's chair" where students can either read a finished piece to the class or read a rough draft and ask for feedback. They also suggest an "Author's Circle," which provides a similar opportunity for students to receive constructive feedback from their peers.

Elliott and Lynch also recognize the importance of a well-stocked and curated class and school library for an energized writing program. Good books provide helpful models for students, and the authors suggest various titles to support curriculum expectations. As any teacher knows, however, finding the money for such an endeavour isn't easy. Classroom libraries, in my experience, are funded almost entirely out of a teacher's pocket. School library budgets are a pittance, and some librarians support the collection with their own money. Depending on enrollment, a school might not even have a full-time (or even half-time) teacher/librarian.

There are times when the authors' commitment to writing overlooks other valuable things that occur in the classroom. Elliott and Lynch clearly recognize that the most precious commodity in any classroom is time, and most teachers have experienced the frustration of losing instructional time to other activities. I agree with the authors that students need writing time every day. Still, they overstate the matter when they write that "a field trip to Apple Land or concert rehearsals cannot get in the way of providing students with an opportunity to practice their writing" (p. 62). It is easy for any teacher to become enraptured with their subject. The authors' commitment to teaching writing is laudable; however, it is important to remember that other learning events that may seem ill-conceived or a waste of time to some teachers can bring both joy and substantial learning to students. These observations, however, do not detract from the very engaging and helpful book that Anne Elliott and Mary Lynch have written. *Cultivating Writers* provides sound advice for creating a writing-positive classroom. Both authors are passionate language teachers. Their desire to help students is genuine, and their combined years of experience are evident in the suggestions they offer. Elliott and Lynch want students to see themselves as writers, and this is a goal that all teachers aspire to achieve.