

Details

Writing Without Limits: Strategies for Encouraging Creativity with Katharine Hsu - 200

In this episode, Katharine Hsu, educator and founder of All the Write Colors, joins for a conversation about how teachers can adapt writing activities to meet the needs and interests of their students. You'll also hear plenty of creative, flexible, and diverse strategies to motivate and celebrate writers of all skill levels with and without digital tools.

Link to live show notes: <https://classtechtips.com/2023/01/31/encouraging-creativity-200/>

Introduction

Hello there, my name is Monica Burns and welcome to today's episode of the Easy EdTech Podcast!

I'm a former NYC public school teacher and started the Easy EdTech Podcast in 2019 to share my favorite tips, tricks and strategies for technology integration. You'll hear stories from my time in the classroom, the work I do now with schools and districts, and my travels to different EdTech events.

Each episode is designed to give you ideas you can try yourself, share with a colleague, or bookmark for later in the school year — so don't forget to head to my website classtechtips.com/podcast for all of the show notes and resources from today's episode.

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Today's Intro

This week's episode is titled: *Writing Without Limits: Strategies for Encouraging Creativity with Katharine Hsu*. Katherine and I first met as fellow Apple Distinguished Educators and I'm excited for you to hear our conversation today. Katherine is a former classroom teacher who supports student writers in lots of different ways. You are going to hear a lot of great ideas in our conversation today!

Episode Transcript

Monica Burns:

Welcome to the podcast. I am so excited to chat with you today about ways to find the joy in writing and writing activities that teachers can use. But before we jump in, would love to hear a little bit about your current role in education. You know, what does your day-to-day look like?

Katharine Hsu:

Yeah, so my name is Katherine Hsu, and I am currently owning my own business called All the Write Colors, right Meaning the word for writing with a pencil. And my day-to-day is different and I get to kind of set my own schedule. So I have a couple of kids that I work with in the mornings, either virtually or in person with either creative writing or reading support very hands-on. And then in the afternoon, noons is what it gets really busy between like three to eight, because that's when a lot of the kids that I work with, they still go they're not homeschooled. They go to traditional schooling. So I will work with them either like a creative writing club that's virtual, or I go to their home or they come here. And when I'm not with the students, I'm either just like personally planning, creating games, planning personalized lessons, and developing plans for each of the kids, reaching out to families, checking in on them. And also just like working on my brand. You know, how do I want to, like how, how do I, what's my next step? How do I want to help more people in the community locally? Instagram stories. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>, all of that. And honestly, part of it is just like time for self-care. I've noticed that my work like depends on creativity and creativity comes when I feel most rested. So some of that work I do during the day so that I can stay creative for the rest of the time.

Monica Burns:

I love that. Just thinking about, you know, the parts of your day where you're going to need that extra like, creativity boost, especially as we talk about something like writing today, you know, and as we think about different writing activities that teachers can try, we know that writing has a place across subject areas, across grade levels. Right. So core to the work happening in classrooms, you know, what are some strategies for introducing a writing activity to students particularly for those kids who might be a little hesitant or less confident in their writing abilities than their peers?

Katharine Hsu:

Yeah. I would almost associate, and I probably will say this often during the podcast, but I associate writing with art. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative> more than I would associate writing with, let's say like math or science. And so especially with kids who are hesitant or not confident,

you know, with art, what we would do is we would give them a piece of paper. We would give them crayons, we'd give 'em color pencils, markers, like, choose whatever you want to do and just draw what do you feel like drawing? We usually always say, what do you feel like drawing? Right? Mm. Yeah. Mm-hmm. <Affirmative>, like, we don't say like, okay, today we are going to do pointillism or we are going to do this. Like, we don't start there. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. So it's the same thing with writing is like, I strongly believe in prompt free writing or like genre free writing.

Katharine Hsu:

So no prompts, no genre. It's just about that child's passions, that child's interests at that time, what they want to write about. And from there, I will then start teaching, you know, writing skills or whatever they're ready for. Mm-Hmm. But it's not, it's actually, it's really hard for teachers cause we want to mm-hmm. We feel like we need to inspire them. But if you take away the prompts and you take away the genres, and like with pick with art, if I start drawing, a child will start drawing mm-hmm. <Affirmative>. So if I start writing, a child will start writing. It's supposed to be a collaborative, fun, creative art process. And the second we take that away, then we take the fun and the creativity away from writing. And that's why kids become hesitant and confident about writing. So that's what I would suggest as an activity is just like, see it as an art experience mm-hmm. <Affirmative> than another assignment.

Monica Burns:

I love that, you know, introduction to that type of experience as opposed to jumping right in, you know? But like having that art example paints such a picture, you know, of, of what it could look like because you are getting kids to focus in on their interest. You're getting them comfortable, which is so important. You know, and I mentioned already, you know, writing of course takes place in every subject area. So I'd be curious if you have some examples of writing activities that you found to be particularly successful in your teaching experience and work with students?

Katharine Hsu:

Yeah. So do you mean like during the writing subject time or like during other subject times?

Monica Burns:

I would say even in, you know, other content areas, perhaps, you know, in a social studies or science or or math experience. But it could also be, you know, in a writing classroom. Of course. Yeah.

Katharine Hsu:

Okay. So I think that to introduce, to get students to freely write in the other subject areas, it's like asking a child, going back to the art example, to draw a picture of what they see historically when they're learning some, an historical event in social studies. I think that a child can access that because they have drawn before. Yeah. And if they've never drawn pictures before, then they might be like, I don't really know what to do. So I think that if we are going to introduce writing activities in other subject areas, we want to make sure we also make time for truly free writing mm-hmm. <Affirmative>. so I would start there first. So I would either say like, do you want to write a story or do you want to write a book about a topic you really care about? And so then students are freely writing, like, I'm showing up, like these books that these kids have written, like creepy stories like books about snakes and dinosaurs, or they make up like a bunny versus a turtle.

Katharine Hsu:

So it's like free writing. And then that way during during other subject areas, then you can bring in certain, like role play topics mm-hmm. <Affirmative> or for example with, with social studies something that could be fun as role playing, like putting yourself in in the shoes of somebody during that time period. So like I have one student who is learning about paleolithic Time period, and she has the writing experience. So she wanted to write an entire story about, actually wasn't Pa Pale, it was about Pangea. She reminds a, a whole right story of like this, like a caveman family of seven kids. And they are living in this one little area, but then they start noticing cracks, hence the Panga <laugh>. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative> change in how they have to migrate. And so she's taking everything she's learning and being very creative and developing a story.

Katharine Hsu:

But I would say that that girl has had foundation already mm-hmm. <Affirmative> of writing is fun. So that I want to, I can be creative with that. So that's one way with math. I had a student last night who really strong in math, but actually what's really, when she says she struggles in math or a teacher says she struggles in math, it's really because she's struggling with the word problems. Yeah. but if you see them as stories, right. So we'll take math problems that she can solve really well, and we develop stories from that mm-hmm. <Affirmative> and then we'll type those stories up, we'll add pictures to them, we'll print it out and even create an answer key for it. And so she is writing stories from her numbers and that's giving her a little bit more access to word problems. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>, I'm putting in quotes. Yeah. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative> that seem very intimidating for her. It looks more like, oh, these are just like fun examples.

Monica Burns:

Yeah. And I love that math example too, because I think, you know, whether it's math, whether it's social studies like you mentioned, you know, and, and I know as an upper elementary school teacher where I taught a few different subject areas right? Over the course of the day, you know, we sometimes take for granted that everything is transferring right to one area, to the nexts, and absolutely true at a secondary level, right? Where you're making assumptions right, of what you hope is happening in another classroom, say with writing, that that's going to be able to be brought into the work that you're doing in a content area. So, you know, I think that's a really great way of framing, like what is the intro to that content area, writing activity that is really, you know, intentional to set up kids for success.

Katharine Hsu:

Yeah. One more idea I wanted to share is if we were to bring writing into another subject into a content area, it would be important to think also about the realistic connection to why we would do this so that kids feel very relevant with this type of writing. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>. So for example, I've seen a lot of lesson plans where they suggest like writing an essay or writing some sort of like prompt that they fill out. But one time in science we were learning about the life cycle in the ocean. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>, and this is like, kids were already really interested in social media, right? So I made this whole like, Facebook template and every kid had to pick one organism in the ocean mm-hmm. <Affirmative>, and they had to write Facebook posts as if they like are living in the ocean. And like, oh, I just ate plankton today, but

Monica Burns:

Then status, status update. Yeah.

Katharine Hsu:

<Laugh>. Yeah. But they would have to talk with each other in class and they'd be like, oh, I'm going to @ you, I'm going to @plankton mm-hmm. <Affirmative>. And then the, then that person would have to, and their pages or Google docs, they'd have to be like, okay, I have to repost something like, oh, I, I just got eaten today by @crabs, <laugh> or something like that. So it's very realistic. It teaches them also like how to appropriately write and on social media, which is going to be a skillset mm-hmm. <Affirmative> that they are going to learn. If we don't teach 'em in school, where are they going to learn it? And then if they abuse it, then we have only ourselves to blame. Yeah. So bring that into content areas because those are places also for writing. Another one is like writing reviews for Amazon, you know, like that's something that we're going to be doing, so why not teach kids how to do that and bring that into content area subjects. So

Monica Burns:

No, those are such great, authentic examples, right. That, you know, we might not think of it as a writing activity at first glance, but it is, you know, really is asking students to, you know, write the type of, you know, content that they might consume themselves. Right. Or they might see themselves in other spaces. And so I love that social media connection. So, you know, I'm curious before, you know, we talk a little bit more about, you know, certain activities. Are there any, you know, common misconceptions about writing? And I think, you know, you already mentioned the prompts and, and that kind of piece for jumping right in. But, you know, are there some common misconceptions about writing that you do think are important for educators to address and acknowledge?

Katharine Hsu:

Yeah, there is actually several of them that I've almost had to unlearn myself. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative> one of them is this belief that a child can only write when they can spell. And they have good handwriting mm-hmm. <Affirmative> that the metaphor I like to think of it is asking a child that you can only play soccer if you can dribble and do all of the intricate skills in soccer before they play. Right. A child will never play soccer. Usually what we do with soccer is we give them a ball, we show them how to kick, we say this is called a dribble go. And then as they finally get better after like little leagues and stuff like that, then we start teaching them skills for kids who are really interested. Same thing with writing. I think that we think like, oh, we immediately start correcting spelling, start correcting capitalization and their handwriting and you know, that we tell families like, oh, you know, your child's handwriting is really, you know, really rough and then the child doesn't want to write well.

Katharine Hsu:

Like, that has nothing to do with being a good writer. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>, like being a good writer is about being able to express your thoughts. Yeah. Feelings your ideas into a string of words and, and knowing how to put that on paper that is called being a writer. So that's one misconception. The other one is that writing activities must be paragraphs on a piece of paper mm-hmm. <Affirmative>. And then that is writing. If you think about like, the amount, like like a amount of writing that we do as grownups, most of my writing are emails, <laugh> notes to myself, comments on Instagram you know what I mean? Like those are the kinds of writing. Once in a while I might need to write a proposal or a formal letter mm-hmm. <Affirmative> and things like that. But if those are the kinds of writing that we do most, why are we not teaching those things Yeah.

Katharine Hsu:

In the school and grading them as rigorously as we are grading essays. Yeah. That is high quality writing that we should be teaching kids and that should be part of writing assignments. So that's like another misconception is we're expecting kids. Oh. And you

have to write fiction stories and that's the only kind of writing Right. You ha you you can do Well what about picture books and all kinds of other stuff. It's just like those misconceptions can turn into what hinders a child from seeing themselves as a writer. So we wouldn't want to like, take our misconceptions into the reason why a child has limited mm-hmm. <Affirmative>, you know, beliefs and who they, what they think of themselves as a writer.

Monica Burns:

You know, it's so interesting as you say that because it really, you know, makes me think about the celebration aspect of this. Like what are we celebrating, right? What are we placing value on? Like are we celebrating that writing that might, you know, have handwriting that's a little tricky to read. Or are we celebrating the writing that is not just the short story, of course worthy of celebration, but Right. Also these other types of products that kids can create. So, you know, you mentioned some pieces around student interest already and student needs like, like the handwriting component or like stringing words together. So, you know, I'm curious, you know, how can teachers adapt writing activities to meet the needs and interests of their students? Are there any, you know, technology tools you can recommend to listeners that might support with, you know, support that idea of addressing student needs and their interests?

Katharine Hsu:

Yeah, so for interests I would say, you know, really make the intention to be flexible with your own thinking and really like see that child. So like for example, I have one student who was struggling in middle in her seventh grade class with English and her essays that she has to write. But when I met her, she, I'm trying to get to know her and she's showing me her piles of makeup. Well, turns out this girl can tell me all the different shades and types of makeup and foundations and complexion, blah, blah, blah. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. And so she has written an entire like, magazine on makeup and she uses Google Slides for it so that she can add her design, she can do research, she can add all the pricings and like design it in like a little magazine. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. So I would say like with interest, just hear that child and whatever they think is interesting to them, not to you, but to them <laugh>, go for it.

Katharine Hsu:

And what's really cool is her writing has like shot up. So like not just strong in the makeup magazine that she's writing, but it's impacting her, her essay writing too. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative> because she's seeing herself as writer. However, when it comes to like technology for her Google Slides is helpful too for her to just like quickly type it in instead of a Google document because she likes images mm-hmm. <Affirmative>. But for other kids, it really depends on that child's interest and needs, like you said. So for some young younger kids who are ready to go on move to technology I do use Google Slides a lot because it's very

easily accessible. Yeah. Not just to the child but to the family. Yes. Because I need the family to help set them up and they can share it with me so I can work with children across the country in other states.

Katharine Hsu:

Because it is a virtual, like, wait, so even though there's so many other amazing digital book making apps or mm-hmm. <Affirmative> document apps, there's just something about Google Docs and Google sites, it's universal. So it less, less lifting of families to also support. Another thing that's interesting though is I have like, let's say you have a kiddo who's seven or eight and their teacher is saying that they're struggling with writing, but you talk with them and they like are like a little scientist or a little professor mm-hmm. <Affirmative> and they can talk so much about a topic forever. Right. It's like seven going on 37, yeah. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>, that is a child that needs to go on technology because what might be happening is that developmentally they're handwriting, they're spelling, they're just learning the skills of writing, but their brain is ready to write a textbook. Yeah.

Katharine Hsu:

Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. Yeah. So what they need is some sort of tool that helps 'em get all their ideas out a little bit faster. So maybe that could be speech to text. Like, there's one six year old that I worked with last week who was in tears because he didn't want to write on paper. He wanted it to be very professional. But then Google, like Google Docs was also really intimidating. And she, he's six but he knows the solar system better than like a science teacher. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative> <laugh>. So we, so his mom helped and because she knows Google Docs like introduced speech to text to him. He, like yesterday I saw him, he's on chapter eight of a solar system like book that he loves and he takes his laptop home that he wants to work on his book. So those kinds of like very simple daily tools are very helpful for like a young writer who cognitively is very high. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>. So I love that.

Monica Burns:

Go ahead. No, I was like, I just, I love your, you know, emphasis on keeping it simple. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative> choosing tools that families can also jump into. Like looking for those extra features like voice to text that's going to, you know, help a student become a storyteller. Right. In all the ways that that means. And even with the example you mentioned about like all the shades of makeup Right. Or all the things that you might want pictures to go alongside of. Right. Having that opportunity to pair them together, you know, I think is just really special. So, you know, you, you mentioned this a bit because of the family connection and would love to, you know, hear, do you have a, a favorite way to use technology to help students, you know, create artifacts of learning or share their writing with the larger audience? Maybe it's families. I don't want to say just families because I think that's a really special

audience. But, you know, when you think about sharing widely, is there anything that's like a go-to in your tool belt?

Katharine Hsu:

So I might sound really old school saying this mm-hmm. <Affirmative> and I don't know if it was like co covid that made a lot of things not tangible in life or whatever, but one, one of my go-tos is printing hardcover, printing tangible books. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>. So I'm holding one up here so I know people who are listening can't see it. But I took a child's book about Wildcats that they made on Google Slides and we added pictures and we went on Vistaprint. So you know how you can

Monica Burns:

Order

Katharine Hsu:

Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative> like wedding photo books, you know, or like when you go on vacation. So all they need is 20 pages <laugh>. So what it I did was like, I just downloaded them all as images mm-hmm. <Affirmative> and her slides were black anyway, so I just picked a black photo book background and I made like look at the back. Like it has like, oh my, oh yeah. It even has like her dedication page. She has yeah, she even has like a certificate. So it's like all in here. I got a cover in like the spine. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>, she can put it on the bookshelf. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>. So this is one of the very like, powerful technology ways is just using digital book making. Like I've, I've seen, I haven't tried it yet, but there's like once upon or mixed book mm-hmm. <Affirmative> those could be really great for like that kind of artifact.

Katharine Hsu:

Back in the day, one of my favorite ones was blogging websites. Today what I probably would do was I would probably make Wix websites for kids like that makeup writer. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>, I have, I have fantasies of starting a website for her on Wix. because Wix is very easy to Yeah. To understand. And have her just like load all of those to a website so that it's, it's available for every, everybody to read. But, but back in the day I had my fifth graders do that on a blog site and it was not me giving them prompts, it was them creating a blog about something they really cared about. And we had people in Canada, California commenting on it and they felt like they were real writers with real audiences. Yeah. So I'm just like such a real life connected teacher. I think it's just like super important. So like when they publish books, like I literally go buy a red carpet and we roll it out <laugh>,

Monica Burns:

I love that

Katharine Hsu:

<Laugh> have like paparazzi and stuff, so

Monica Burns:

No, I mean that just, you know, and as you're talking there, it made me think of, you know, tools like Adobe Express and Canva for education now too, which has the web publishing tool and it's really wild to think about the evolution there of connecting, you know, students with an audience. And so I want to make sure Katharine , that everyone knows where they can connect with you and where they can learn more about your work. So tell us a little bit about where they can, can stay connected.

Katharine Hsu:

Yeah. so I'm probably most often on Instagram cause I share pictures and videos and whatever is on there I share on Facebook as well. So you can definitely find me at both places @allthewritecolors. So write as in W R I T E and I also have a website for more information about me, my background or just what I do. And that's also allthewritecolors.com. If you are a professional that has LinkedIn, I am on LinkedIn under Katharine Hsu.

Monica Burns:

Awesome. And we will link out to all the things. So anyone who's listening, even if they're on the go today can circle back and click those links and follow along with your work. So thank you so much for your time today, Katharine , for sharing all of these really actionable tips for listeners. We appreciate you coming on to share.

Katharine Hsu:

Thank you. Super fun.

So let's make this EdTech easy with some key points from the episode...

Try giving students a chance to write without a prompt.

Listen to student interests.

Explore different ways for students to write.

Use technology tools like voice-to-text.

Share student creations to celebrate their work.

Remember, you can find the shownotes and the full list of resources from this episode including all of the ways to connect with Katharine Hsu on classtechtips.com/podcast and finding today's episode #200!

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Outro

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And if you want to share an idea from the episode with a friend or colleague, text, tweet or post the link on your favorite social media platform – and of course you can tag me @ClassTechTips with any questions!

Episode Resources

- Learn more about Katharine Hsu's work on her [website](#)
- Connect with Katharine Hsu on [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), & [LinkedIn](#)
- [Google Slides](#) (Free Online Presentation Tool)
- [Vistaprint](#) (Printing service)
- [Wix](#) (Website builder)
- [Adobe Express for Education](#) (Free creation tools)
- [Canva for Education](#) (Graphic design platform)
- [How to Use Technology to Support Every Student Writer](#) (Blog Post)
- [Help Students Discover the Joy of Writing Stories](#) (Blog Post)
- [How to Support Learner Variability with Voice Technology](#) (Blog Post)
- [Ways to Support Student Writers With & Without Technology](#) (Blog Post)
- [Creating Real Audiences for Student Projects with Jennifer Hall](#) (Podcast Episode)

- [How to Easily Create Choice Boards & Honor Student Voice](#) (Blog Post)
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