Kelly Chandler-Olcott and Donna Mahar

A Framework for Choosing Topics for, with, and by Adolescent Writers

An eighth grader lists her goals for summer camp.

A brother makes notes on a napkin for a toast at a sibling's wedding.

A teacher writes a recommendation for a student for a summer job.

What do these people have in common? Each is a writer making decisions about framing a topic. To create an effective text, each must envision a specific audience and determine how much detail is appropriate for that audience's needs. Each could approach his or her text from various angles, some of which may work better than others depending on the writer's intentions, experience, and skill. Topic selection is clearly a multifaceted process requiring the orchestration of numerous skills and strategies.

Unfortunately, our own experiences in middle school rarely provided us with opportunities to develop these skills and strategies in the context of self-selected writing. Most of our teachers determined the topic and genre for our texts, often setting length limits ("two pages only and skip the top line") and delineating specific content ("Include information about the country's principal imports/exports"). We frequently learned more about completing an assignment that would earn an A than we did about crafting a piece that would satisfy our own intentions while meeting the needs of particular readers.

Thanks to the influence of Atwell (1987), Rief (1992), and Barbieri (1995), among others, many middle school teachers now offer students more freedom around topic selection, often through writing workshops. In these settings, young learners explore areas of interest, start and complete texts at different times, and publish their work for different audiences. In our experience, workshop, more than almost any other structure, aids students in developing fluency, builds on their interests, and helps them see writing as personally relevant. Many of our students first tasted success as a writer when they received praise during a conference or shared a piece from the author's chair during workshop.

At the same time, we've come to realize that self-selection of topics often doesn't go far enough. Learners can't choose an option if they don't know it exists. Deep exploration of a genre happens best when the entire classroom community undertakes it (Nia, 1999). Many high-stakes assessments ask kids to write on topics and in genres that they would generally not select on their own. Reconciling these complexities with research data demonstrating the importance of choice to students (Bintz, 1993) can make it difficult for teachers to determine how to handle topic selection in their classrooms.

For us, use of Margaret Mooney's (1990) to-with-and-by framework, originally articulated as a guide to early reading instruction, helps to balance teacher direction and explicit instruction with student innovation and independent learning. Mooney's model, discussed in more detail below,

provides us with a tool to evaluate our decision-making and ensure that we are providing student writers multiple chances to learn skills and strategies around topic selection that are valued in, as well as beyond, school.

The To-With-By Framework

Mooney (1990) argues that a balanced approach to literacy includes a range of opportunities for teachers to read to children, read with children (and for children to read with each other), and for children to read by themselves. According to Mooney, the same is true of writing: learners need opportunities for experts to write to and in front of them, to write with them, and to write by themselves. Each approach provides a different amount of support—what Bruner (1986) and other Vygotsky-influenced scholars (Dixon-Krauss, 1996; Moll, 1990) call scaffolding—from the teacher or more capable peer, and each requires a correspondingly different degree of independence for the learner. (Figure 1 shows how various methods of writing instruction might be placed on this continuum.)

We can easily extend Mooney's model to topic selection. The prepositions she uses may need to change from *to* to *for*, but the general idea remains the same: If we intend for students to be able to handle a range of writing tasks, then they need to have opportunities to have topics chosen *for* them; to choose topics *with* others, including the teacher; and to choose topics *by* themselves. Each approach addresses different aspects of topic selection, including how to deal with assignments that must be completed regardless of personal interest (for); how to negotiate topics with other writers and pursue a common goal (with); and how to direct one's own efforts with little or no assistance from others (by).

In the pages that follow, we discuss each approach in turn, providing examples from Donna's seventh-grade English classes and Kelly's literacy methods course for middle-grade teachers. Next, we move to an extended example from Donna's practice that demonstrates how the approaches may be integrated within a unit. Finally, we consider some of the broader implications of the framework that we're beginning to consider as

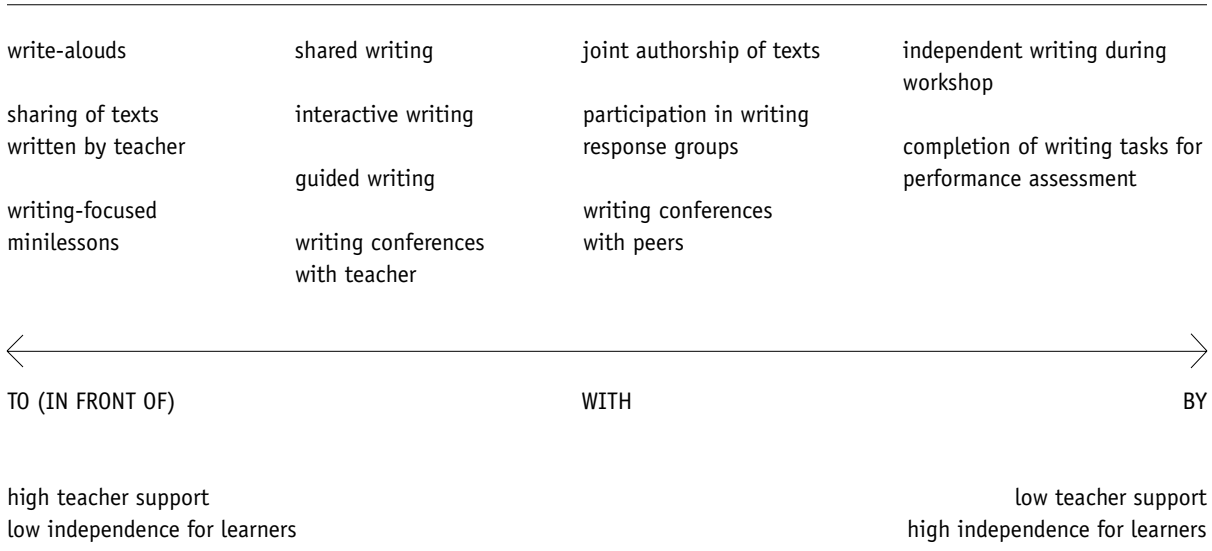

Figure 1. Margaret Mooney's To-With-and-By Framework Applied to Writing

teachers and researchers of digital, as well as print, composition.

Choosing Topics *for* Students

Despite the influence of writing workshop advocates, we're willing to hazard a guess that choosing topics *for* students is still the most common of the three approaches in many schools. While an overreliance on this approach is dangerous, in that it positions adolescent writers as less capable and autonomous than we know they can be, we don't believe that teacher selection of topics is an oppressive or authoritarian practice in and of itself. In the world outside school, particularly in workplaces, writers are frequently asked to compose various texts—from contract bids to grant proposals, from memos to manuals—on topics and in genres they did not choose. Rather than being restrictive, these tasks provide opportunities for people to write within particular discourse communities, to contribute with their texts to the life of a business, an organization, or a community. Providing opportunities for students to make these "required" texts their own, expressing their own ideas and using their own voice, is a primary reason why both of us assign topics on occasion. Other reasons to choose topics *for* student writers include:

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- to promote engagement with issues that students might not choose on their own,
- to give students experience with topics/genres of power (Delpit, 1995),
- to offer classes multiple perspectives on the same topic/issue,
- to use writing to assess the learning of specific content (Duke & Sanchez, 2000).

Although teacher selection of topics and texts is not the centerpiece of Donna's approach to English instruction, she does select three novels a year for the class to read together. She uses this traditional framework judiciously, knowing that students who have not experienced it may be disadvantaged in subsequent contexts where it is valued. When students explored *Call of the Wild*, for example, Donna decided to introduce the comparison/contrast essay, a genre that students must master for state assessments and other opportunities for formal writing. After selecting the topic for the class (compare/contrast Buck's character to three other dogs in the story), Donna then worked with students to consider the complexities of approaching a high-stakes piece of writing. As student groups outlined their essays, Donna circulated to help them think about how awareness of purpose and audience might influence their planning. She highlighted the rubric that would be used by state evaluators when reading essays like these in a test situation. In this way, she guided them in a supportive context through writing and assessment practices—what Delpit (1995) might call "genres of power"—that would have a direct impact on their status in communities beyond her classroom.

Sometimes, we decide to select a topic for student writers in the midst of our teaching, rather than from the outset. An example of this comes from Kelly's graduate course, where students wrote weekly papers about assigned readings that were used to begin small-group discussions. At the beginning of the course, students had total freedom to select topics for their papers. After taking notes about trends across several sets of these assignments, Kelly noticed that their quality and complexity seemed to be directly related to the text students chose to consider. Those who focused on the textbook, a largely practical resource, displayed a narrower range of critical strategies (e.g., questioning the author, hypothesizing about implications) than those who wrote about one or more of the research articles from the coursepack. Consequently, Kelly e-mailed students asking them to focus their remarks for the next session on an article, not the textbook. She noticed that the papers for the next class sparked more interesting

discussion in small groups and allowed more connections to previously-read texts as well. While her intervention limited students' topic choices, it supported them in developing other competencies central to the course.

Although it is a power that should be used wisely, even sparingly, we believe that teachers need to recognize the importance of choosing topics for students. While students can and often do make good choices for themselves, we can't expect them to have a sense of the range of the competencies and experiences they'll need in the future. Sometimes we need to create opportunities for them to learn aspects of topic selection that they might otherwise miss.

Choosing Topics *with* Students

Of the three approaches, we think choosing topics *with* student writers is the least prevalent in schools, but it may be the most important, as it allows a unique opportunity for teachers and students to meet in Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development (the space between what learners can do independently and what they can do with assistance). Teachers who help students to choose can evaluate individual needs and provide carefully-calibrated assistance. Other reasons why teachers might choose topics *with* students include:

- to offer students options within some parameters (e.g., curriculum guidelines),
- to open the classroom to negotiation and shared authority (Oyler, 1996),
- to coach students through strategies they can use to select topics *by* themselves,
- to learn more about the discourse communities (Gee, 1996) to which students belong.

An example of shared authority and decision making can be seen in a penpal program Donna and her suburban middle schoolers established with urban primary students. The purposes of the program were multiple: to help the younger children with writing; to provide writing tools and supplies to an under-resourced school; and to offer a nonthreatening, authentic audience for the seventh graders, especially those who needed to develop fluency. Although Donna made the initial contact with the partner school, reminded students about the interests of five and six year olds, and assisted with the use of Standard English, her students worked with each other to determine what to cover in their letters, when to make deliveries, and what literacy supplies to send. Planned collaboratively by Donna and her students, two literacy celebrations were held annually for the penpals to meet. After establishing a theme for each celebration with Donna's help, students worked together to write memos to the administration, contact the bus garage for transportation, arrange for catering, and, finally, to produce a book of poetry to be distributed to each elementary student. The complicated logistics of this project necessitated Donna's guidance (it could never have been carried off by students alone), but they were actively involved in the decision making at all points of the process.

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Similar negotiations took place in Kelly's class around an assignment that required students in small inquiry groups to select and research a topic related to literacy in grades 3–8. After students considered possibilities through e-mail, talk, and whole-class brainstorming, partnerships formed. One group narrowed their interests to two topics: home-school connections and writer's notebooks. Following a weeklong preliminary investigation of available resources, they reconvened with Kelly to discuss the feasibility of both options. During the conference, Kelly helped them consider which topic might be better given the assignment's final product (a resource guide on the topic for classmates). Eventually, the group decided to focus on home-school connections because they found more empirical research on that topic and because they felt that the literature on writer's notebooks

would be accessible to classmates without their help. This example points out how teachers *and* peers can assist with topic selection, as well as how the process can be influenced by writers' awareness of a potential audience's needs.

"With" approaches also allow teachers to adjust when encountering snags in choosing for students or asking them to make choices by themselves. Negotiating boundaries as needed, rather than offering unfettered choice, can support students who are unused to the freedom to choose. Alternatively, when teachers assign a whole-class topic that is too difficult or too restrictive for some students, negotiating the terms of the task (e.g., allowing students to write on the same topic within a different genre or to widen the focus to an area of interest) can make an enormous difference in the effectiveness of students' texts as well as the degree of their engagement in our classrooms.

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Choosing Topics *by* Students

Although teacher selection of topics and negotiated choice are important, they aren't adequate by themselves. Sometimes we have to trust learners to know what they need better than we can, especially when we teach 5 or more classes with 20 or more students in each. If we never allow learners to make choices independently, then we have no way to assess whether they've internalized the skills and strategies they learn about topic selection from *for* and *with* approaches. Other reasons for student writers to choose topics *by* themselves include:

- to help them identify and develop preferences as writers,
- to create more interest in and motivation for writing,
- to promote learners' use of writing as a powerful and practical tool,
- to create room in classroom communities for individuals' passions and interests (Kent, 1999).

One way Donna promotes self-selection of topics is to ask students to keep a writer's notebook modeled on those discussed by Fletcher (1996). Students record quotations, observations, and daily occurrences. Once a week, they select an entry to expand and polish for audiences beyond the classroom. To support these publication efforts, Donna conducts minilessons on the protocol for sending work out to be reviewed. She also recommends writing contests and calls for submission, cutting down students' legwork at this early stage of their initiation into professional publication. The final decision about which work to send to which publisher is made by students, however, and the results have been positive, with over 200 pieces of student writing published annually. On occasion, students have won writing contests with work that would not have been among Donna's top choices had she been the one deciding which texts to submit.

Kelly recently experimented with a structure to promote more choice by graduate students about which studies to read and how to respond. In addition to whole-class readings, Kelly developed a list of articles from which students were required to read three. Most decided to choose texts with, and write to, an e-mail "buddy" from the class. Although these buddies selected the articles together (a "with" approach) from Kelly's list (a "for" approach), each student made personal choices about what to discuss in their responses. Some recounted school experiences that reminded them of the pieces; others connected ideas from the reading to their own teaching; and still others focused on the research itself, critiquing the authors' methods and conclusions. The assignment's open-ended structure allowed them to frame their messages in whatever ways seemed most appropriate and comfortable, and the e-mail partner-

ships created an authentic context for writing, as well as an interested audience.

The To-With-By Framework in Action: A Closer Look at One Unit

This last example points out an issue that we think bears further exploration: within a given lesson, unit, or class, approaches that can be classified variously on the continuum are often blended. As Mooney (1990) says, "In a balanced program, the approaches will be so intertwined that the children will move easily from one approach to another without commenting or even being aware of the change" (p. 19). Donna's recent retooling of one unit put this principle into action. In previous years, the unit had begun with the reading of picture books Donna selected on social-issues themes. Students then chose topics for their own picture books that usually, though not always, reflected themes from the books used as models, including homelessness, rejection, poverty, and abuse. At the center of the unit were choices made by students about what issues to represent and how to represent them.

After becoming acquainted with Mooney's framework last spring, Donna redesigned the unit when she taught it this year. She took a much stronger "for" stance by situating the picture book assignment within the context of women's history month and articulating clearer parameters for the final product: a historical fiction picture book profiling a woman who made significant contributions to her community.

Donna opened the unit by reading two picture books, *Dinner at Aunt Connie's House* (Ringgold, 1993) and *The Ballot Box Battle* (McCully, 1996), that demonstrated different approaches to fictionalized historical writing. Next, she modeled for the students how she would go about selecting a topic and an "angle" for her book project. She worked with students to make a web of potential subjects, and then did a think-aloud to show how she selected a focus on Georgia O'Keefe. The following day, she brought in several books on O'Keefe and shared with the class her journal musings on what would be helpful from each source. Another think-aloud analyzing her strengths and limitations as a writer/illustrator helped her decide to write about O'Keefe using a structure borrowed from Ringgold's book. Not only was she modeling the topic selection process, but she also demonstrated for students how writers draw on multiple sources to make decisions about content and structure for their texts.

Before selecting women to profile independently, students worked in cooperative groups (a "with" approach) to read and discuss brief biographies of women that Donna selected for them, such as Rigoberta Menchu, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Marian Wright Edleman. Together, students brainstormed possible ways to design picture books that would highlight aspects of these women's accomplishments. In the midst of this work, Donna used another Faith Ringgold book, *Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky* (1992), as well as several other picture books about Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad, to model once more how a subject might be represented in multiple ways. Students in the groups were instructed to explain the costs and benefits for each potential design they developed. This carefully-sequenced series of activities equipped them to make better decisions about their texts when they were finally turned loose to pursue independent writing.

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Only by employing *for* and *with* approaches as well as *by* ones did Donna offer all students access to skills that carried social and economic coinage beyond the classroom. By narrowing the options for this particular assignment, she created space for a deeper, more thorough teaching of a particular genre—the historical fiction picture book. While the texts students created within this unit were in some ways constrained by Donna's guidelines, the options they then possessed for other, subsequent texts—most notably the pieces

they polished from raw material in their writer's notebooks—were wider, and the quality of their texts, as well as the depth of the issues they covered, were significantly greater than they had been in previous years when Donna had been less explicit with her scaffolding.

Complicating the Framework with Topic Selection in the Digital Age

Convinced of the value of students' multiple literacies, including those often marginalized in school (Gallego & Hollingsworth, 2000), we recently began a collaborative research project on adolescents' use of technology for personal literacy purposes. Our 12- and 13-year-old informants have served as guides in new terrain, including the worlds of HTML programming, digital video editing, and role-playing games. Their experiences and insights have also pushed our thinking about topic selection, causing us to revisit our assumptions about print literacy at the same time we construct new understandings about digital literacy. Two examples of technology-mediated composing have been most striking to us in this respect.

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First, several students have shared with us their animation-inspired fanfictions, compositions that draw on characters, settings, and plotlines from Japanese cartoons they follow largely on the Internet. These stories are original in some senses, since the authors decide which characters to use, what situations to put them in, and how to resolve those conflicts. At the same time, some of the key parameters are chosen for them by the cartoon writers, as well as by Web site authors who provide interpretations of characters as well as fill gaps about episodes our informants may have missed. (Since most of these cartoons are not aired regularly in the United States, it can be difficult for fans to monitor them closely.) Fanfictions that don't remain true to the spirit of their characters and faithful to their fantasy worlds are not considered very successful by readers, even if they are innovative in other ways. It's hard to say where to classify such composing opportunities on the for-with-by continuum.

Web site development, a process at which one of our informants is particularly adept, provides a second case for consideration. Although Iris determines a focus for each of her sites (e.g., her former HTML help site aimed primarily at kids, a "shrine" to a favorite animated character), she doesn't do so in isolation. Her ideas are often sparked by her browsing of others' sites as well as by following links in e-mail messages sent to her by online friends. She borrows HTML code from commercial Web sites as well as personal ones maintained by other adolescents. As she works, she actively seeks online guidance and critique from others in her electronic composing community. Her decisions about what kind of a site to build and how to design it are continuously influenced by her interactions with other digital authors, most of whom she has never met face to face.

These examples point out the socially constructed nature of topic selection, even with decisions that might seem to have been made solely by individuals. For us, digital technologies make this social process more "visible" and easier to construe, but similar kinds of genre borrowing and cross-pollination of ideas are certainly present in writing workshops where traditional print literacies are privileged. This recognition does not render Mooney's framework less useful—it can still provide us with a way to evaluate the range of possibilities in our writing classrooms—but it does remind us of the need to see the framework flexibly, to note where approaches blend, and to consider how further advances in technology may necessitate the development of new frameworks as writers integrate those technologies into their literacy practices in the future.

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Quick Quiz on Tonya Perry

Is 8th-grade Alabama teacher Tonya Perry:

a) the recently elected NCTE middle level representative-at-large?

b) the 2001 Alabama Teacher of the Year?

c) a 2001 National Teacher of the Year finalist?

d) all of the above?

If you chose D—All of the Above—give yourself an A+ because that's the right answer! Many congratulations to Tonya for each of these accomplishments, and many thanks to her for all her work with the Middle Level Section.