

THE DESIGNED CLASSROOM

Ten Systems for Building Better Writers and Thinkers
in the Literacy Classroom

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SELECTED READING SAMPLE

Introduction and System 2: The Literacy Autobiography

Life Touch Education

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Introduction

Why DesignED

Every teacher has had this experience: you do something in your classroom that works, and you can't fully explain why. A student who wouldn't write a sentence in September is writing five paragraphs by June. A room that used to need constant redirection somehow runs itself when you're out sick for a week. You know it worked. What you don't always know is what part of what you built made it work — which means you can't always do it again on purpose, and you definitely can't hand it to another teacher and expect the same result.

DesignED exists because I got tired of that gap. Over years as a classroom teacher, literacy coach, instructional leader, and national professional learning facilitator, I kept seeing the same pattern: teachers with real talent, working incredibly hard, producing results that depended entirely on being in the room that day, in that mood, with that particular gift for connecting with kids. The moment that teacher moved schools, or burned out, or simply had a hard year, the results didn't travel with them — because what they'd built wasn't a system. It was talent wearing a system's clothes.

This book is my attempt to take everything I built across those years — the beliefs, the routines, the tools, the daily habits — and turn it into something that can actually be learned, named, and repeated by someone else. Not because talent doesn't matter. It does. But because talent alone leaves too much of a child's education up to chance, and every child deserves better than chance.

Why Now

Writing instruction in most schools still gets treated as an event — a unit, a testing window, a genre study that starts and ends on the calendar. Meanwhile, everything we actually know about how students become confident writers points somewhere else entirely: toward daily practice, toward a classroom culture where writing is simply how the room works, not what the room does on Tuesdays.

At the same time, teachers are more overwhelmed than at almost any point in the history of the profession — buried under initiatives, platforms, and one more thing to implement. The last thing anyone needs is another program. What they need is a way to see their own daily practice differently: not ten new things to add to an already full plate, but a way of understanding how the things they're likely already doing — a warm-up, a rubric, a folder of student writing — can work together on purpose instead of by accident.

That's what DesignED offers. Not a curriculum. A way of seeing.

Who This Book Is For

This book is for classroom teachers who want their daily practice to add up to something bigger than the sum of its parts. It's for instructional coaches and literacy specialists who need language for describing what strong writing instruction actually looks like, beyond "good classroom management." It's for school leaders and curriculum directors who are responsible for scaling something that works beyond one gifted teacher's classroom, and need to know what's actually replicable versus what only worked because of who was standing at the front of the room.

You don't need to teach English Language Arts to use this book. The framework underneath it — Beliefs, Conditions, Systems, Instruction, and Evidence, held together by Weekly Reflection — describes how intentional teaching works in any subject. But the ten systems themselves are drawn specifically from literacy instruction, because that's where I built and tested them, over real years, with real students, in rooms in New Jersey and Florida that could not have been more different from each other.

How to Use This Book

Read the ten systems in order the first time through. They build on each other — not as ten separate strategies you can pick and choose from a menu, but as a single progression. After that first read, use it differently. Return to a single system when you're trying to solve a specific problem in your own classroom. Use the Design Reflection questions at the end of each chapter — alone, with a coaching partner, or with a full staff — to test your own practice against what's actually written there, rather than what you assume you're already doing. Use Appendix C, the planning template, when you're ready to design your own version of a system, in your own voice, for your own students. I don't want you to copy what I built. I want you to understand why it worked, well enough to build something that's authentically yours.

The Five DesignED Components

Underneath all ten systems sits a five-part framework:

Beliefs are what you decide is true about children before you ever meet them — whether they deserve safety before they've proven proficiency, whether every one of them is capable of growth. Beliefs are easy to state and hard to prove.

Conditions are what you build once, before students ever arrive, so they hold without anyone touching them again — a numbering system that protects anonymity all year, a folder waiting in a bin for writing that doesn't exist yet, a room arranged before a single student walks in. A Condition is a fact of the room. Once it's built, it just sits there, ready to be used.

Systems are what put those facts to work. A System is something that only stays real because someone keeps doing it — a five-minute routine repeated two hundred mornings a year, a writing center that only functions because students choose to use it,

a Friday-to-Monday rhythm of writing, returning, and filing. Take the action away, and the System disappears. That's the whole difference between the two: a Condition is true whether or not anyone touches it again. A System is only true while someone keeps doing it.

Instruction is what happens inside those systems, day to day — the modeling, the scaffolding, the release of responsibility from teacher to student.

Evidence is what proves any of it actually worked — not a test score alone, but a student holding two pieces of their own writing, months apart, and recognizing themselves in the distance between them.

And Weekly Reflection surrounds all five, continuously, because none of them hold on their own. A belief you stated in August has to be tested against the actual students in your actual room in November. A condition you built at the start of the year has to be checked against who's sitting in the room in March. Weekly Reflection is not a sixth component sitting beside the other five. It's the discipline that keeps the other five honest, every week, for as long as you're teaching.

How the Ten Systems Fit Together

If you've read nothing else in this Introduction, read this: the ten systems in this book are not ten identical tools you can pick up in any order. They're sequenced on purpose, and they don't all do the same job.

The first system is different from the rest, because it doesn't use anything that came before it — it builds the very things every other system will depend on. Before students ever arrive, you're not managing a classroom yet. You're building the conditions a classroom will need: where students sit, how their identity stays protected on the page, what the room itself already says before you've spoken a single word.

The second system is the first real test of something you can't build directly — trust. You can build a folder or assign a number in an afternoon; once it's done, it's done. You cannot build trust that way. You can only create the conditions where a student might choose to be honest, and then find out, through what they actually write, whether they believed you meant it. That's why the Literacy Autobiography comes second: it's the first moment a belief about your students gets tested by their own choice, rather than simply assumed because you said it out loud.

The middle systems — the Do Now, learning targets and success criteria, the writing center, portfolios, text-dependent writing, student rubrics — are where the classroom actually runs, day after day, all year. Each one hands a little more responsibility to the student than the one before it. First consistency, then clarity, then the first choice to improve without being told. Then the ability to see that growth for themselves, proof the whole approach travels beyond one room or one format, and finally, the ability to judge their own writing without you standing over them.

The ninth system doesn't ask anything new of a student at all. It asks something of you. Weekly Reflection is how you find out, every single week, whether everything you built in the first eight systems still matches the students actually sitting in your room. A belief that was true in August, a condition you built before students arrived, a routine that's run all year — none of it stays accurate on its own. Someone has to keep checking.

The tenth system doesn't hand you a new routine to build at all. By the time you reach it, you don't need another one. What you need is the answer to a bigger question: why did any of this matter in the first place? That's what the last chapter gives you — not a new practice, but the reason the other nine were ever worth building.

Writing is the vehicle for all of it. But if you finish this book believing it was really about writing instruction, I haven't done my job. It was always about something bigger: designing a classroom where a child gradually becomes the author of their own growth, seen clearly enough, consistently enough, that they never have to wonder whether who they are and what they think matters.

Now, let's begin designing.

System 2: The Literacy Autobiography

Once a student trusts they're safe enough to be honest on the page, they still have to decide what's true enough about themselves to write down. This is where I found out whether that trust was real.

My belief is that before I can teach students as readers and writers, I need to know who they already believe themselves to be as readers and writers. Not their reading level. Not their test scores. Who they think they are, before I've said a single word to change their mind about it.

Before I Taught Them Anything

I learned this from Stacey Leftwich, a professor at Rowan University, in a reading course I took. On the first day, she had all of us — adult college students — complete a literacy autobiography. She gave us the criteria and let us write.

It was the first time a professor had built the culture of a course before ever teaching a single concept in it, and it was deeply reflective for me. Writing it, I understood something about myself I hadn't fully named before — how much of who I became, I owe to the written word.

I didn't think, right away, I should give this to my own students. That realization came later. But once it did, I never taught a class again without starting the year this way.

My Life as a Reader and Writer

On the board, the first week of every school year, I wrote: My Life as a Reader and Writer.

The success criteria stayed simple. Try your best. Describe a book you love. Do you like to read? Do you like to write? If you don't, tell me why — what stumps you? If you don't know why, that's okay. Just make sure it's always appropriate.

They got a hundred percent for completing it. Some students wrote three sentences. Some wrote a page and a half. It didn't matter. They were allowed to tell me they didn't like to read. They were allowed to tell me nobody read to them at home. Nothing was off-limits, as long as it was appropriate — they just had to be honest.

I want to be clear about what I was actually asking a twelve-year-old to do. I was asking them to admit, in writing, to an adult they'd known for three days, something that might embarrass them — that they were behind, that they hated the thing school valued most, that reading had never once felt good to them. And then I was grading that confession a hundred percent, no matter what it said. On the very first day, before I'd taught them anything, they learned something about this room: telling me the truth

would not cost them anything. That I would follow through on what I said. That being known here didn't end in judgment.

Nineteen Boys and Six Girls

One year, I had a class after lunch — nineteen boys and six girls. One of those boys wrote, in his literacy autobiography, that he did not like reading. Didn't want anything to do with it.

I knew I needed to connect with that group beyond anything that could happen inside four walls. So some Saturday mornings, my daughters and I would drive half an hour to the ball field near where a lot of them played, just to be there. Not to teach anything. Just to let them see that I noticed what they cared about. That helped me later, when I started matching nonfiction texts about baseball to several of those same boys.

The Invisible Work

None of what I did with that information ever looked like anything from the outside. It looked like I was simply handing a student a book, or mentioning something I'd seen on a commercial, or saying something about a character that made a kid look up and think, she actually knows this story. It looked seamless. Normal.

But underneath it, their autobiographies were telling me things I used constantly — their spelling, their instinct for punctuation and grammar, whether they understood how a title shapes a piece of writing, whether they could format a paragraph, what kind of sentence structure came naturally to them. That data shaped which supplemental texts I chose, how I approached a student I needed to motivate, what I taught and when, and how I protected a struggling reader from a book that would only confirm what they already believed about themselves.

I wouldn't hand a student who couldn't spell something like *Nate the Great* — a book pitched two grade levels below where they actually were, which would have told them exactly the wrong thing about their own ability. I might reach instead for a graphic novel, or a book like *On My Honor* — not textually complex, but carrying a theme a seventh-grade boy could actually feel something about. I wasn't trying to make them read a harder book. I was trying to make sure the next book they finished told them something true and good about themselves as a reader.

What They Didn't Know

At the end of every school year, students completed the same task. *My Life as a Reader and Writer*, one more time. They always said the same thing — "oh, I remember doing this."

What they didn't know is that I'd kept their original autobiographies in a file of my own, all year, untouched. When they finished writing the new one, I handed them the first one back. Some of them read their own words like they belonged to someone else.

I never told them what to feel when that happened. I didn't need to. The distance between the two pages did that work on its own. My job that day wasn't to point at the growth. It was to make sure the evidence existed at all, and that a student was holding it in their own hands instead of hearing it from mine.

That's what the systems in this book were always for. Not to replace this kind of knowing with a form or a folder. To make sure it happened for every student, every year — not only for the ones I happened to notice on my own.

How This Connects to the Framework

A belief isn't proven by what a teacher says about students. It's proven by what a system consistently asks them to trust. The Literacy Autobiography works because it asks the same thing on day three that Design Before Students Arrive asked before students ever walked in: tell the truth here, and nothing bad will happen to you.

Stacey Leftwich didn't just inspire me. She handed me a system durable enough to survive being carried out of one classroom and into every classroom I taught for the rest of my career. That's the difference between an idea a teacher borrows for a semester and a system a teacher can actually build a practice on. It doesn't depend on the room, the grade level, or the year — only on whether the teacher follows through on what she told students would happen if they told her the truth.

Design Reflection

- Do you know who your students believe themselves to be as readers and writers — or are you only guessing, based on a level or a score?
- What would it cost one of your students to admit, honestly, that they hate reading, or that no one reads to them at home? Have you built a room where that admission costs them nothing?
- Think of a student you've already decided can't handle a certain book. What would it take to hand them something that surprises both of you?
- Where do you show up for students outside the four walls of your classroom — and how does what you learn there change what happens inside them?
- If you kept every student's first piece of writing this year and handed it back to them in June, what do you think they'd see?
- What is one true thing about yourself as a reader or writer that you've never told your students — and would it change anything if you did?

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