

The Joy of Writing: Creating a Class Culture for Writing

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Every human being has hundreds of separate people living under his skin. The talent of a writer is his ability to give them their separate names, identities, personalities and have them relate to other characters living with him.

- *Mel Brooks (1926-) US comedian, producer, director*

Either write something worth reading or do something worth writing.

- *Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) US statesman, diplomat, inventor*

All art is a kind of confession, more or less oblique. All artists, if they are to survive, are forced, at last, to tell the whole story; to vomit the anguish up.

- *James Baldwin (1924-1987) US novelist, essayist*

What on Earth Was I Thinking? (Introduction)

The overwhelming majority of students in my classes are at best confused and at worst, frightened by the prospect of writing. Over the years, they have learned that writing is, more or less, a tedious task requiring great skill and effort on their part. Their experiences with writing in school have only served to reinforce these notions. The sad thing is, I can't blame them one bit. How am I different from them? Why is my attitude towards writing so much more positive than theirs? The answer is: I've had success with writing, more so now than at any other time in my life. In grade school my attitude wouldn't have been much different from many of theirs today. Writing was a chore. Mechanics were all important. It seemed teachers were just waiting for me to mess up in my writing so that they could jump all over me with a red pen and with bold red strokes, edit both my enthusiasm and my self-esteem.

The other problem was that the writing I did in school was dry. It only truly got interesting when I was able to choose my own topics for writing and explore these topics on my own. My students generally feel the same way. They universally expressed a need and a desire to take ownership of their writing assignments. This is a wonderful idea, and one that a majority of teachers recognize and wish they could do something about. Unfortunately for most of us, the constraints of time, curriculum, and the vastly varying needs of a diverse school population make such liberal ideas about allowing for total freedom in student writing utterly ridiculous. Is there a happy medium? I believe there can be through creative writing.

Only in university did I truly find I had the control and confidence to be an effective writer. I had mastered most of the usage and mechanical issues that plague the writing desks of American high schools and I had also the freedom to truly explore through writing.

All of this reflection led me to the following question: is it possible to use creative writing to improve student attitudes towards writing and also student academic writing. It is my hope that by engaging students in meaningful personal writing, they will be more receptive to learning the skills that will also improve their academic writing, and that this improvement will be quantifiable by objectively evaluating student academic writing before, during, and after their experiences with a creative writing project.

One of the most important and influential courses I have ever taken in my life was a university level writing course. The writing quickly became a secondary component of the course as themes of inspiration, risk-taking, self-discovery, and the communal feeling of “we’re all in this together” began to dominate our class. The teacher instilled a love and appreciation for writing that most of us had never known. I have never since taken a piece of writing for granted. It is with these experiences in mind that I set out to explore some of the beliefs that I have acquired about writing:

- There are definite, quantifiable skills that can be taught and learned about writing.
- Writers learn to write by reading, writing, and responding to writing.
- All students can learn.
- Improving abilities in creative writing can and will impact a student’s writing abilities in all strands of writing.

Humans have always had a strong underlying desire to express themselves through writing. Why is it that so many of my students are "reluctant writers"? Much of the literature I have read and much of the experience I have gained in the classroom tell me that this is because too often writing is a process that actually involves the students and their lives very little. Creating the classroom environment in which students can freely and effectively express themselves through writing and take full ownership of their writing is an essential part of this writing unit.

This project is written with the following principles in mind:

- You learn to write by writing.
- Writers need real audiences and genuine purposes.
- Writing is a varied, individual process, a series of stages that move from conception to revision.
- There are specific skills that improve writing.
- Writing involves the personal risk of self-disclosure and self-discovery.

- Constructive evaluation demands that as well as responding to form and usage, the teacher responds to the author as a person, and to the message as thoughtful communication.

I looked into the Bay Area Writing Project that is run by the University of California at Berkeley to get an idea of what their program was all about. The Bay Area Writing Project bills itself as a course that “operates on a teacher-teaching-teachers model. Successful teachers of writing attend Invitational Summer Institutes on the University of California, Berkeley campus. During the school-year, these teachers provide professional development for other teachers in schools.” The idea is that the teachers in the program participate in the writing. I adopted a similar model, although mine was based on the concept of writers teaching writers. As a writer and a teacher of writing I consider it important to participate fully in the writing going on in the classroom. I shared my work with my students and opened it up to constructive criticism. I feel it is important to value the writing of everyone in the class. Editing and proofreading were done in pairs. This means that students were expected to share their work with others.

Dramatis Personae (Background)

I decided to embark upon this project with an eleventh grade “regular” English class. There are twenty-four students in this class, nine of whom are language minority students. Most of the minority students are from a Spanish background, while a few are also of Vietnamese and Middle Eastern descent. As a whole, the class is generally weak in their reading and writing skills, as witnessed through their handling of much of the difficult material covered this year in the American Literature curriculum.

How Was I Ever Going to Accomplish This? (Methods)

Students were first given a questionnaire on writing. This questionnaire was designed to gauge students’ perceptions and attitudes towards writing. It asked them to take a look at the different modes of writing they have done in their lives and to examine what it is that either turned them “on to”, or “off of”, writing. Most of the students cited writing letters and emails to friends as something that they enjoyed doing and as something that they did quite often. In terms of other types of writing, most of them mentioned academic essays as a mode of writing that they’ve done and generally did not like. While a couple of students wrote of how they enjoyed writing poetry, I was surprised at the almost complete lack of personal story writing displayed by the class. Not one student mentioned writing stories as an activity they had done before. As educators, we pay much lip service to getting students to read for pleasure. How sad that we don’t stress the other side of literacy: writing. We often talk about the importance of helping our students to become lifelong readers. It is my hope that students will also become lifelong writers. Here is the questionnaire that I used:

Writing Survey

Please write your full name:

Please circle one:

English IS my first language
English IS NOT my first language

1. What types of writing have you done in the past either at school, at work, or at play (writing for personal reasons)?
2. Do you enjoy writing? What about it do you enjoy? What about it frustrates you or “turns you off”?
3. How often do you write for personal pleasure (letters to friends, emails, etc.)?
4. Describe any experiences you’ve had with a journal or a diary:
5. What types of writing assignments in school do you enjoy the most / enjoy the least? (Please answer both questions)
6. In your opinion, what makes a person a writer or an author? Do you consider yourself a writer or an author?
7. Think back to a piece of writing you’ve done which you remember. What was it? Why did you write it? Why do you still remember it?
8. Why do you think people write?
9. Who are some of your favorite writers? (book authors, newspaper columnists, magazine writers, etc.)
10. What are some of your favorite things to read? What is/are your favorite book(s)?
11. Describe your feelings about having more of an opportunity to write about yourself and your life.
12. Do you prefer to write with paper and pencil or using a computer?
13. What topics, if any, do you think you’d enjoy writing about?
14. Discuss whether you think writing is a creative activity or not?
15. You’ve just filled out a questionnaire about writing. Discuss whether or not you think what you just did is considered “writing”.

The questionnaire was followed by a forty-five minute in-class essay writing assignment. This essay evaluation was administered three times in all: once before the start of the project, once three weeks into the project, and once at the end of the project (6 weeks later). I began this unit with the idea of trying to monitor student writing ability by giving Virginia Standard of Learning (S.O.L.) writing prompts and testing students by having them write essays based on these prompts just as they have done on the S.O.L. tests. It became clear after the first writing task that students really had a problem doing this. Many of the students did not take the test seriously or just had trouble trying to generate ideas and get started with their writing. In total, more than three quarters of the class had problems with getting started writing the test and also with actually completing the task. While there was some improvement generally in students' ability to get started at the writing task and in students' general organization of their writing from the first assessment to the final assessment six weeks later, there is not enough evidence to draw any strong correlation between the project and the slight increase in the S.O.L.-style essay scores. I think also that simply by repeating the writing prompt exercise three times, students became more proficient at performing the task. If I had to do a similar project again, I would definitely drop this assessment tool in its current form.

Handout: The Pillars of Writing Wisdom

After the test we looked at the handout "The Pillars of Writing Wisdom." This paper looks at the basic fundamentals of writing (the seven skills used by writers: discovering a subject, sensing an audience, searching for specifics, creating a design, writing, developing a critical eye, and rewriting.) Many abstract concepts regarding writing are introduced through this handout, but, with concrete examples, the students seemed to understand what this paper was all about. The point I really emphasized was that writers show and not tell. Here is the handout I used:

The Pillars of Writing Wisdom

There are specific skills that you as a writer can develop to improve upon your writing. These seven skills are: the ability to discover a subject, ability to sense an audience, ability to search for specifics, ability to create a design, ability to write, ability to develop a critical eye, and the ability to rewrite.

These are a lot of big ideas. Here they are summarized and explained.

The Writer Sees The writer sees what we do not see in what we all see. He finds the ordinary extraordinary and old truths new. He has the gifts of reception and perception. He appears to receive more impressions than other people do, but in their confusion he discovers patterns. He has ability to be specific, to see with precision and accuracy. He disbelieves to believe, destroys to rebuild. The writer has to impose order on disorder.

The Writer Writes The writer has the courage or the compulsion to reveal himself. He commits himself. The writer is obsessed with form, but not as an empty vessel into which he pours meaning. He knows he has to have something worth saying. What he wants to say determines which tools he will use. For him words are never isolated from meaning, grammar segregated from subject, rhetoric divorced from purpose.

The writer works through specifics to generalizations and back. Hemingway said writing is “architecture, not interior decoration.” The writer builds with specific details, writing by selection. He forms, fits, shapes, and wastes. He knows the value of what he completes might properly be judged by what he has ruthlessly tossed away.

He respects brevity, knowing its challenge, and attempts to cut away from complexity to clarity. His goal is simplicity—the flight of the seagull. He seeks the least complicated way of expressing the most complicated idea. The writer tries to see and then make the reader see. **He does not want to tell but to show.** He believes he is successful when he is invisible, when the reader discovers the subject for himself.

The Writer Rewrites Art is beyond craft, but art grows out of craft. Craft is the calculation which turns inspiration into creation.

The craftsman writes by rewriting, and he rewrites by re-seeing and re-thinking. He seeks the inspiration of the writing desk. He understands that writing is a way of perceiving, a method of discovery, and refinement and synthesis and clarification.

The writer dreams of art, but he works at craft.

“The writer is sensitive the way high-speed film is sensitive.”

“The writer is not looking for ideas so much as he is trying to handle the ones he has.”

“The good writer is wasteful.”

“The writer shows, he doesn’t tell. Don’t tell me it’s raining, SHOW ME what it feels like to be rained upon!”

We then looked at some short story openings produced by professional writers and examined what it is that makes an effective story opening. Students answered questions by themselves and a discussion ensued. The brainstorming session produced a list of the following on the board: “describes what’s happening”, “starts in the middle of things”, “has action (uses many verbs)”, “makes you want to read on.”

At this point, I introduced a short story to the class. I said nothing about it except that it was a story we were going to look at together as a class. I read the story to the class and asked them some questions: what was effective about this story, what was ineffective, what did you like about the story, what didn’t you like about it, etc. A majority of the students (thankfully) enjoyed the story and found the surprise ending to be quite cool. A student commented that they liked the opening because it hooked them and made them want to read more and it contained “action words”. I then revealed that I was the author of the story. The students were in disbelief. One actually said, “Shut up, you’re kidding!” Others remarked, “I knew there was something up with it.” The students were generally smiling and many took a second look at the story after learning that I was its author. I told the class that this was proof that if I could do it, they could do it too.

I put a prompt up on the board and asked students to brainstorm a list of ten topics they might possibly write on about this topic. I tried to choose a topic that all students had some connection with. The first topic was “I remember a time/place...” I told the class to write about what they knew and that it was their lives that they knew best. I inevitably encountered the response, “But my life is so boring!” I told the student that that was only because they had experienced it, but to an observer, many of the experiences that they have had would be very interesting to experience through the eyes of the writer. I also pointed out the freedom that came with the act of writing about their lives. So long as the “essence” of their story is true, they could change the story as much as they wanted to. They could change names, locations, and even alter events and situations to suit their needs. I used a river analogy to explain the concept of stretching the truth in a personal story. As long as the truth is there and the story is authentic and real to you (the river) you could expand on it and add to it (overflow the river banks) and the “essence” of the story would remain believable. The class was to begin a story based on the first prompt at home and bring it with them for the next couple of classes.

The next time the class met, the students were asked to get up and put the opening sentences of their stories on the board. We did this as one large group to avoid the embarrassment that some students might feel writing at the board by themselves. We then, as a class, looked at the story openings to see if they were effective. We used the list of effective short story opening qualities that we brainstormed last class as a guide for determining the effectiveness of our story openings. Amazingly, all of the story openings used the techniques we had discussed earlier and were, therefore, solid story openings.

Peer Editing

After sharing our openings, students were each given a peer editing sheet to work on with a partner in peer editing each other's work. Some of the elements students focused on during their peer editing sessions were: story openings, clarity, staying on topic, showing not telling, and several other of the requirements we had gone over earlier. Here is the peer editing sheet that we used in class:

PEER EDITING WORKSHEET	
Date: _____	
Writer: _____	
Editor: _____	
ELEMENTS TO CONSIDER	COMMENTS
Subject	
IV. Ideas	
<i>Personal feelings</i>	
<i>Ability to tell an engaging story</i>	
V. Convey thoughts	
Audience	
VI. Focus	
<i>Style</i>	
<i>Word choice</i>	
<i>Sentences</i>	
<i>Variety</i>	
<i>Straying thoughts</i>	
<i>Lack of clarity</i>	
<i>Use of detail</i>	
<i>Makes sense</i>	
VII. Flows well	
Design/Form	
<i>Opening line (hooks reader)</i>	
<i>Final words (closing – story feels finished?)</i>	

Careful formation of paragraphs

VIII. Shows doesn't tell

Plan/Structure

IX. Organization

Wordy?

Off topic?

X. Body follows the opening topic?

Mechanics/Surface Features

XI. Punctuation

Grammar

Spelling

Usage

XII. Is this piece ready for further editing/revision?

During peer editing, I circulated throughout the classroom and sat with each pair of student writers. I looked over each student's story and conferenced with each student to offer instant feedback on their stories. The students enjoyed this one-on-one contact, and each time I did this I always encountered a waiting list of about five students everywhere in the classroom that I went who wanted me to read and discuss their story with them. At the end of the peer editing and conference with me, students were sent off to revise and rewrite, changing and improving their stories as I, and their peers, had suggested. They were then to bring in a revised copy of their stories for next class. This was the formula that we followed as a class. The process was repeated two more times. The second writing prompt that they were given was, "A person that I know." The final story was completely open, but students were reminded that they had to demonstrate the skills that we had discussed and practiced for the first two.

Final Evaluation

For the final evaluation, students were asked to submit the following: all rough copies and final copies of their stories, all three peer editing sheets they filled out evaluating other students' work, a typed copy of their favorite story (personally chosen), and a self-evaluation. The entire project was graded on a total of sixty points, ten for each story, five for each peer edit, and fifteen for the self-evaluation. Here is the self-evaluation that we used:

Student Name: _____ Date: _____

The most surprising aspect of this writing project for me was:

I would like to find out more about:

If I were to do this project again I would:

My advice for a student who is doing a similar project is:

The biggest problem I had was:

I solved this problem by:

What I enjoyed most about this project was:

I Really Wasn't Expecting That! (Reflections)

Positives. I was almost discouraged from choosing writing as a research topic when I saw how little existing information there already was on the subject. I am glad I didn't let that discourage me, as I believe this project had real value for my students and me. We all learned many things about ourselves and about each other. Some of the stories that we wrote were very personal and powerful and showed the students the power and beauty of the written word.

One student wrote eloquently about a family member who was told as a child that he was going to the zoo and was instead taken from his homeland never to return. Another student wrote a story that explained to me for the first time why he had a large scar on the back of his head: he wrote a chilling story of the time he was brutally attacked by the neighborhood dog. One young woman wrote a story from the perspective of her cousin about the time he was in a horrible automobile accident. The stories were varied and personal. When we shared in class, everyone was silent and enthralled with the revelations of their classmates. None of us realized the struggles, triumphs, and rich family and personal histories of the people who sit beside us every second day in English 11. The way that people opened up and shared in class and the way people really listened to each other created a pleasant classroom environment.

I administered the following survey to get an idea of how student attitudes and skills had changed over the course of the project:

Writing Project Survey

How has your attitude towards writing changed (positively or negatively) over the past months?

What, if anything, have you discovered about yourself through the writing we've been doing?

What have you learned about writing?

What is one positive experience you've had during this writing project?

What problems have you encountered during this writing project?

Overall, do you feel you're a more competent writer now than you were eight weeks ago?

If you could start this project over again, what would you do differently? What would you do the same?

I was delighted by the results of the survey:

- Fifty-three percent of the class reported that the writing project was a positive experience for them and that they viewed writing in a more positive light as a result of doing the project
- Forty-seven percent of the class reported that they had no change in attitude towards writing since we began the project

No students had a negative change in attitude, which was a great relief to me. This result of the survey surprised me most. Here are some of the comments that students had regarding the project:

- I can express myself more easily and correctly on paper.
- I would write my stories in a different style [what would you do differently?].
- [Writing] is not that bad when you know what you're doing.
- I feel my [writing] skills are more solid.
- I don't hate [writing] as much as I used to.
- [Writing] is a very good way to convey your ideas.
- I've learned that one's writing is much more interesting when it's from real life.
- I feel more competent as a writer now than I was eight weeks ago.
- I'm proud of myself, I could actually write my own story.
- When I was making up a short story, I actually was having fun.
- I now find it easier to think up ideas for my writing topics.

If I Could Do it All Over Again

While I feel I've had some success with my original goals of providing students with a positive writing experience in which they were able to perform authentic, personal writing tasks, there are some areas that I would certainly change if I was able to do the project over again.

The first thing I'd change is the essay writing evaluation tool I used. Both the students and I did not feel comfortable with the writing to the prompt activity. I originally wanted to have an affective, quantifiable way of measuring increase in student writing ability. While the results tend to support a slight increase in

writing ability among the class, there is by no means a direct correlation between the project and this slight increase. I contribute the slight increase, rather, to increased familiarity with the writing task and to taking the writing task more seriously. There does seem to be anecdotal evidence, however, to support an increase in writing ability as presented by the students themselves in comments such as, "I feel my writing skills are more solid" and "I now find it easier to think up ideas for my writing topics." If I were to have students writing to a prompt in the future, I would begin by having a few trial runs to get students ready for the actual writing exercises.

References

Bay Area Writing Project Homepage, U. of California at Berkeley. Retrieved March 2, 2000 from <http://www.gse.berkeley.edu/outreach/bawp/bawp.html>.