

Dialogue



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Authentic Voice: *An Heroic Journey in Writing*

Callie Ryan Brimberry, SDAWP 2008

Finding one's authentic voice is similar to embarking on a heroic journey. You don't just wake up one day and discover yourself as an authentic writer. Developing voice takes time: one must dabble in different techniques, sample various styles, and even practice remixing numerous pieces one finds appealing. Throughout the journey students will no doubt taste the thrill of adventure as their abilities are realized, only to refuse the call when the task of writing becomes too overwhelming. The dauntless will face many obstacles, including the infamous writer's block, only to fail repeatedly in preparation to succeed epically. However, with mentor texts serving as a guide, and a plethora of allies in the forms of authentic audience, academic language, writing groups, and genuine feedback and reflection, students will soon empower themselves with the ability to transform from those who write to fulfill requirements into confident writers.

The Journey Begins: Self-Discovery and the Willingness to be Uncomfortable

*"We must be willing to let go of the life we planned
so as to have the life that is waiting for us."*

—Joseph Campbell

Every year, both teachers and students enter the classroom alone in search of who they are, and more importantly, in search of who they have the potential to become. I can recall preparing for my first day of teaching seven years ago: I wore my "I'm all business and you will respect me suit" and marched into the classroom envisioning a jousting match between the students and me. I knew one of us would leave the winner, and with my shiny new armor, I selfishly hoped I would emerge the victor. Long story short: I most definitely wasn't, and the suit has never been worn again. Teaching and learning should not be immersed in a struggle of power between student and teacher. Whether we like it or not, being the teacher provides us with an automatic privilege of power. That power should never be used to declare ones "rightness" over a student's "wrongness," to silence a voice because it may be more influential than our own, or to marginalize another opinion because we fear embarrassment. We ought, instead, to use that power to guide students into guiding themselves, as well as to provide them with a safe classroom for ideas and interaction. We must be willing to be uncomfortable together with our students so that we are not alone in our warped safety nets. We must model the willingness to be wrong in order to create the safety in which our students can stumble in order to succeed.

During my first day at the San Diego Area Writing Project Summer Institute, we read Margaret Wheatley's "Willing to be Disturbed," and my teaching pedagogy was changed forever:

We have to be willing to examine our practice, to be disturbed about what we think we know about teaching and learning...We don't really know what we're doing; we're teachers, we're supposed to know, but we don't know everything...I'm as unsure about all of

this as you are unsure, but I believe we are doing the right thing. It is of critical importance to this organization, of critical importance to our kids...Your classrooms are learning labs; we want you be exploring, looking, analyzing... (Wheatley 1).

So, teachers, take off the armor and set aside the sword so that you won't have to fall upon it while seeking forgiveness from your students later.

The Ultimate Sacrifice: Acknowledging Humble Beginnings

"Getting a comedic view of your situation gives you spiritual distance. Having a sense of humor saves you."
—Joseph Campbell

I strongly believe that authentic voices must be nourished in a classroom of trust and safety; students and teachers must treat each other as equals in all aspects of the classroom. This includes relying on restorative justice instead of authoritative discipline, allowing formal platforms where students can question instructional approaches and

grades, and creating arenas through which students have voices in the curriculum. Sometimes it is necessary that one individual must suffer for the betterment of others; that individual is you.

Again, society's educational system entitles teachers to the privilege of power, so we have to level the playing field. We must be willing to humbly offer moments of our own educational experiences that made us feel embarrassed in order to prohibit, or at least lessen, possible moments of embarrassment for our students. Over the years I have noticed several such instances that make students (or anyone in front of peers) shut down, such as mispronouncing words and being interrupted with corrections. Such instances encourage a fear of speaking in front of peers, a fear of being wrong about anything. If I expect my students, all of whom are English language learners, to read their writing aloud, I have to expect that these moments will arise.

I now spend the first day of class providing students with written anecdotes of moments in the classroom that were uncomfortable for me as a student: my cheeks burn in embarrassment as I read how I mispronounced the character name 'Stacey' as 'Stacky' for an entire chapter I had to read aloud while my peers failed to hide their laughter; I rush through the story of how I was afraid to "presentate" my own writing in middle school, so I pretended to have to go home sick the entire week of presentations. I tell them how I almost cried in embarrassment when I pronounced 'hierarchy' as 'high-archy' and the teacher departed from instruction to correct me in front of everyone (They always seem shocked when they discover that I was in graduate school and teaching in my own classroom at the time). Even now, my cheeks are red as I recall these moments and my finger hovers over the delete button. No one wants to be embarrassed, especially in educational settings when peers make up the audience. I question how I could have ever asked my students to write authentically and share transparently without modeling such behavior first. I now understand that if I am asking for authentic voice, mine bet-

ter be authentic too.

Choosing a Path: Writing for an Authentic Audience

"Your sacred space is where you can find yourself over and over again."
—Joseph Campbell

"Mrs. Brim, I don't know what to write about!" I can't count the number of mornings that began with

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authentic voices must
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in all aspects
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that phrase during my first few semesters of teaching. What's worse: I had no idea how to respond. I didn't know what they should write about either, and they were growing suspicious of the ridiculous number of "free writes" I offered. And then I read Ralph Fletcher's *A Writer's Notebook* and realized several key components to the teaching of writing that I had yet to implement: students need an actual space of some kind (a paper notebook or otherwise) to continuously collect their writing; if I want authentic writing then I need to provide authentic prompts and audience; and students need to be able to frequently choose their writing topics...even if they make me uncomfortable.

By providing students with a tangible object in which they can collect their words, we honor them as authors. There is a huge difference in confidence and reflection between a student who only has random sheets of writing and a student who has a notebook full of writing. In my classroom, actual notebooks are the most realistic option, and we instill Writer's Rights in order to maintain trust and respect:

1. No one can read another's writing without permission. This

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Striking a Chord with Voice: Authentic Voice in Writing

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includes other teachers. (My students felt violated when another teacher came to observe our class and read their writing over their shoulders without asking permission.) Good rule of thumb: if it makes us uncomfortable, don't do it to someone else.

2. Students have the right to ask the teacher not to read an entry. Students simply fold the page in half if they don't want me to read it at that moment. (I can still give them credit because I see that they wrote, but not *read* what they wrote. This is where the mutual trust comes in to play.)

3. Any writing can be added to the notebook, assigned or otherwise. There are no limits.

Providing students with authentic prompts and audience is a non-negotiable if you desire authentic writing in return. So, asking students mundane, last minute, "I thought of it on my way to work" questions will probably not cut it. Writers need more than that, according to Fletcher: "Writers are like other people except for at least one important difference. Other people have daily thoughts and feelings, notice this sky or that smell, but they don't do much about it. All those thoughts, feelings, sensations, and opinions pass through them like the air they breathe. Not writers. Writers record those things" (3-4). Was it any surprise then, when Juan's weekly response to literature entries transformed when the questions became authentic?

(Sep. 13) *No Country For Old Men* Response to Literature Question: What do you think Llewellyn will do next?

"I don't know. Probably drive some more and get new shoes."
—Juan Espinoza

(Nov. 9) *No Country For Old Men* Response to Literature Question: Can one sacrificial act eradicate a history of immoral and selfish choices? Furthermore, can one immoral choice erase every good deed a person has done?

I want to say yes, because it would change my past if I thought it was true. (That isn't even true is it? Believing something doesn't make it real and something being real doesn't mean you believe in it.) Anyway, don't think you can make up for all of the bad you have done by waking up one day and deciding to do something good. Doing one thing good, even if it is sacrificing yourself for others, doesn't make you good. It makes you good in that moment. That is who you are: a lot of moments put together. If you are a lot of immoral moments, then you are an immoral person. Go ahead and do the moral thing if it makes you feel like a good person, but it isn't who you are. Not when it matters.

—Juan Espinoza

Clearly, the issue wasn't with the students' responses, it was with the disingenuous questions they were being asked. On that note, students also need an authentic audience. My students seem more enthusiastic about their writing when we publish it in a class-created anthology and distribute it to the community. Their concern with revised drafts also spikes to new levels when they have an opportunity to be published in periodicals such as SDAWP's *Dialogue* or *Teen Ink*. In addition to publishing, students' writing thrives in authenticity when they know it is appreciated by the targeted audience; having their article on hunger in San Diego read by someone at the San Diego Hunger Coalition is much more likely to influence their writing than if I am the only one reading it. Having purpose, and perhaps the power to influence, is one of the many ways to

Congratulations

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Oscar Preciado

San Diego City College
SD Community College

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San Diego
Global Vision Academy
San Diego Unified

promote authentic writing.

Thomas Newkirk cites that, "...One of the central principals of the writing process movement was student choice, a principal that...is undermined by the unmistakable hierarchy of genres that has gone unquestioned for far too long, with negative consequences for many students" (107). Of course there will always be required prompts we must give our students due to mandated curriculum, but can we be flexible in how they are allowed to present their more creative writing? Students should be able to write both fiction and non-fiction without censorship. Once I vocalized to my students that they could write their stories in the form of graphic novels, poetry anthologies, or any other format, they began to flourish as writers in both what and how they wrote. In particular, male students were much more willing to write creatively when they had expressive permission to write stories containing violence; after all, we were reading *Fight Club* and *The Hunger Games*, so it seemed that writing about violence should be permissible.

No matter how violent the characters in their stories became, none of the students mimicked their characters' actions: "I have no patience with the assumption that boys, as a group, are so volatile, so lacking any mediating judgment, that they will automatically want to do what they write about" (Newkirk 107). In the same way that I doubt Laura, one of my most creative writers, will be stowing away on a tour bus and falling in love with the lead singer—after he, of course, escapes his obsessed stalker—I also doubt that Edgar, who wrote a graphic novel in which an elite team of spies and assassins travelled back in time to attack dictators, will be inciting a violent rebellion against an author-ity figure.

In the end, respect, genuine prompts, and choice lead to authenticity and allow good writers to become amazing writers. Similarly, imagine how much teachers would flourish if they were trusted with writing, developing, and implementing their own curriculum.

Finding Your Voice Through the Wisdom of Others: An Author Study

"Sit in a room and read—and read and read. And read the right books by the right people. Your mind is brought onto that level, and you have a nice, mild, slow-burning rapture all the time."

—Joseph Campbell

Once we created a safe classroom environment together, it was much easier for students to write authentically in their writer's notebooks. Students were writing fluently, but they lacked the ability to speak about themselves, or others, as writers. Part of authentic voice is being able to identify the voice in which one writes. When attempting to teach about voice, I asked students to de-

*So, teachers, take
off the armor and set
aside the sword so that
you won't have to
fall upon it
while seeking
forgiveness from
your students later.*

scribe the tone/purpose of their own writing. Blank stares greeted me all around, until Miguel raised his hand and said, "Well, I don't know how to describe it. Can you give us an example?" Encouraged by his participation, I did just that, even more pleased when he volunteered to show his work to the class. As requested, I listed several adjectives to describe his voice as an author. I asked if anyone had any questions and not a single hand was raised. Success! Later that week, while reading Miguel's weekly reflection on his writing, I found myself nodding in agreement at his words, which I soon realized, were my words. In fact, I read about 30 responses reflecting my own words; coincidentally, all of my students had the exact same writing style and voice. Well played, Miguel. Well played.

If being in high school, both as a student and teacher, has taught me anything, it is that while struggling with

insecurities and endless choices about their futures, youth are much more prone to label others before they begin to examine themselves. This sentiment rings true when asking students to reflect on their voice as authors. So, although students continued to write, I backed off asking them to reflect on their own voices and decided to venture into novel studies much sooner in the year than I had anticipated. I hoped that students would feel more comfortable in analyzing others' writing before I asked them to analyze their own.

As we began to read several novels, short stories, and articles over the next semester, we spent a great amount of time studying the methods and reasoning behind the writing of various authors. During this past year, one class focused on the following authors and their novels as mentor texts: Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* and Veronica Roth's *Divergent*. Both novels focused on proactive versus reactive characters, and as a class, we would examine these parallel themes in order to study the difference in the authors' voices. For instance, when analyzing the theme of being responsible for death (either from killing during a rebellion or abandoning others to their deaths during war), students would label McCarthy's voice from the following excerpt in *No Country for Old Men* as "nostalgic, gritty, choppy, and lacking punctuation to create character authenticity."

You can tell it any way you want but that's the way it is. I should of done it and I didn't. And some part of me has never quit wishin I could go back. And I cant. I didn't know you could steal your own life. And I didn't know that it would bring you no more benefit than about anything else you might steal. I think I done the best with it I knew how but it still wasn't mine. It never has been (McCarthy 278).

Whereas they read a similar excerpt from *Divergent* and interpreted Roth's voice/intentions as: "direct, desperate, unapologetic, reflective—not regretful, clipped sentences to represent urgent glimpses into the past."

I press my forehead to the wall and scream. After a few seconds I clamp my hand over my mouth to muffle the sound and scream again, a scream that turns into a sob. The gun clatters to the ground. I still see Will. He smiles in my memory. A curled lip. Straight teeth. Light in his eyes. Laughing, teasing, more alive in memory than I am in reality. It was him or me. I chose me. But I feel dead too (Roth 446).

Soon enough, students could identify the author of a text based on the familiar traits of the author alone; one student, Richard Hernandez, noted: “McCarthy’s lack of punctuation to represent genuine versus inauthentic characters” and “Roth’s transition from lengthy to short sentences when attempting to incite a sense of urgency in readers.” Their ability to articulate their analyses led to students better choosing and understanding the traits they wished to embrace as authors. For this reason, it is essential to study other authors in order to understand the value of authentic voice. In addition, no author is without their own influences, so it is important that students know that developing their own voice means listening and reading others’. Discovering authentic voice as a writer is a process of reading, writing, and discussing various authors and their intentions for their characters and audience.

Some of the most popular strategies used included:

1. Purposefully Authored: Initially as a class, then in groups, and eventually individually, students read an excerpt and were asked to create a chart describing the tone, the purpose of punctuation, and the message the author wants to convey and why.
2. Vindicated Voices: When reading several different pieces of writing, students would be given an excerpt (a sentence or paragraph that did not include information such as setting, character names, etc.) and asked to guess the author as well as

write a response listing/discussing at least three reasons supporting their guess.

3. Author Speed Dating: Students would be seated facing each other in two rows. One row would have an excerpt they selected from one of the authors read in class. After reading the excerpt, the student facing them would have to guess the author, explain their reasoning, and then explain how the author’s word/punctuation choice accentuated the character, plot, or message of the piece.

In addition, these discussions and reflections were augmented by a clearly expressed focus on academic language. Not only does scaffolding with academic language allow students the ability to articulate their thoughts, it also assists in teaching students why we, as well as authors, make certain “grammatical and lexical choices” (Zwiers 70). As a class, we spent time studying, revising, and adding to the “Aca-

...The San Diego Area Writing Project breathed new life into my teaching; after my first year in the classroom I was in desperate need of meaningful professional development.

ademic Expressions for Interpreting in Language Arts,” “Selected Discussion Themes That Emerge from Literature,” and “Academic Expressions for Persuading in Language Arts” charts provided in Jeff Zwiers’ *Building Academic Language: Essential Practices for Content Classrooms* (70, 72, 74, 76). Soon, students were using academic language to articulate the reasoning behind an author’s writing choices. As a result, the transition into reflecting on their own voice was much smoother once the academic language was accessible and students felt comfortable

in analyzing professional authors.

The Revered Sage: The Mentor Text

“We have not even to risk the adventure alone, for the heroes of all time have gone before us.”

—Joseph Campbell

I can honestly say that the San Diego Area Writing Project breathed new life into my teaching; after my first year in the classroom I was in desperate need of meaningful professional development. In particular, being introduced to mentor texts transformed my classroom and my teaching of writing. Mentor texts served three primary purposes in developing authentic voice: students were granted accessible and celebrated writing techniques that they themselves could employ (students were no longer attempting to understand abstract concepts of writing technique, instead they were given beautiful sentences to emulate); they provided an arena in which students and teachers could articulate the purpose behind an author’s (including their own and their peers’) choice in words, punctuation, and tone; and students were further able to develop, understand, and authenticate their own voices by measuring them against the voices of others.

While focusing on Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club*, we spent time studying the theme of death. When we originally discussed the theme, we did a simple Whip-It: each student was asked to describe death in one or two words, yet no one could use the same word. (To scaffold this activity for ELs, students were asked to write a list of adjectives prior to the Whip-It so they could have a selection of words.) Some student responses included:

“Death is only the beginning.”

—Katya Andrade

“Death is release.”

—Andres Vasquez

“Death is waiting.”

—Vanessa Sanchez

“Death is selfish.”

—Mario Perez

This activity was used as a catalyst for their responses to literature as well as their personal creative writing. However, despite my prodding,

and even begging, the descriptions seemed to stop at these original sentences. In order to provide students with the tools to further develop their voices, each day for the next week we would analyze a sentence on the topic of death (we would later do this for many other topics), focusing on particular grammar and writing techniques from the novel we were reading. I would then model how to copy-change the sentence, before asking students to do so. It was essential that students witnessed their teacher modeling the writing technique because, as Vicki Spandel states: "Nothing, absolutely nothing you will ever do as a teacher will be more powerful than modeling writing in front of your students. It is vital to the successful teaching of writing" (Spandel).

One of the most discussed sentences was from *Fight Club*: "Not like death as a sad, downer thing, this was going to be death as a cheery, empowering thing" (Palahniuk 203). Within days, students began to understand the need for elaboration and their sentences were transformed:

Death is only the beginning.

"Not like his death meant the end, or that it was a bad thing, instead his death meant he had fulfilled his life, he was going to have a new beginning."

—Katya Andrade

Death is release.

"Not as in we seek death because our bodies are temporary prisons for our soul, this death would be a release, a liberation, from torment."

—Andres Vasquez

Death is waiting.

"It was no longer a God-fearing, redeem yourself first type of thing; this would be a relish in your escape type of death."

—Vanessa Sanchez

Death is selfish.

"His death wouldn't be an empowering, meaningful sacrifice, this would be a death of selfishness, and greed."

—Mario Perez

After studying other authors' writing, students gained confidence in manipulating the format of their sentences. They were also encour-

aged to consider word choice, purpose of punctuation, and the true intention of their sentence. Again, students were exposed to limitless options and, because of their access to mentors, thrived in their ability to choose how to write: "By using mentor texts, students would be exposed to a variety of styles of writing and this paved the way for them to create various forms (or genres) of non-fiction writing pieces....Suddenly, learning this genre was igniting passion...including the opportunities of choice" (Israel 61).

A Love Story: Falling into the Abyss of Writing

"It is by going down into the abyss that we recover the treasures of life. Where you stumble, there lies your treasure."

—Joseph Campbell

*One key event
transpired when
students began to see
themselves as writers:
they wanted to share
everything they wrote.*

Once students were equipped with mentor texts and academic language, I noticed a shift in their writing. Not only was there an increase in fluency and engagement during class, students were also bringing in writing they had worked on at home, on the bus ride to school, and at lunch. Even more impressive, students were bringing in mentor texts to share with the class. As soon as students were given permission in the form of accessibility, they fell in love with writing. This is a huge step in the journey of developing authentic voice: students wanted to find themselves in their writing.

One key event transpired when students began to see themselves as writers: they wanted to share everything they wrote. It was imperative to provide space for students to share their work; not only did it provide informal feedback, but it let students talk about their writing and themselves as writers, thus increasing their ownership of their voices.

Also, any writer knows that one often needs to talk things out, with oneself or others, while developing a piece of writing. However, there was absolutely no way to have every student share all of their writing every week, but some more efficient methods of sharing writing included:

1. Daily Whip-its: each student read one line of their writing in quick succession.
2. Post a Tweet: an extra-credit activity that took place when students completed assignments early: students could write a sample of their writing on a post it, place it on the wall, and other students could comment/ provide feedback.
3. ConTEXTuals: students chose a sentence/paragraph from their personal reading and copy-changed it before teaching it to the class and asking them to do the same.

In order to provide a small and safe climate for students to work on more personal pieces, I introduced writing groups (much like those I've experienced at the SDAWP Summer Institute) to the classroom. Students were put into groups of three twice a week (once at the beginning and at the end); during an hour all three students would read their piece aloud to other group members. While listening, students would take notes on their copies of the piece being read. Depending on time, students would discuss their feedback or provide the author with notes. By the end of the week, groups would meet again to share additions, revisions, and to bounce ideas off of each other. These moments of sharing not only encouraged authentic voice, but also served to increase oral language practice and the use of academic language in a classroom of English language learners.

The Cleansing: Letting Go of the Ego

"How to get rid of ego as dictator and turn it into messenger and servant and scout, to be in your service, is the trick."

—Joseph Campbell

As students began to find their voices and flourish as writers, it was necessary to provide time for students to write personal narratives of their choice. Although the topics can be emotionally heavy, it is important to have the freedom to write that which we fear and makes us uncomfortable. When discussing the need for this writing time/space one student, Junior Medina, summarized it best by saying: “In my writing, I can scream as loud as I want.”

During the most recent semester, students were drawn to the theme of being a voyeur of death as a result of their own personal experiences with the untimely deaths of friends, family, and classmates. We analyzed the almost hollow voice narrating the following scene from Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner*, in which the main character finds his nephew in the bathtub after an attempted suicide:

When I wake up, maybe I will discover that everything I saw in the hotel bathroom was part of a dream: the water drops dripping from the faucet and landing with a plink into the bloody bathwater; the left arm dangling over the side of the tub, the blood-soaked razor sitting on the toilet tank—the same razor I had shaved with the day before—and his eyes, still half open but lightless (Hosseini 347-348).

As suggested by students, we used this mentor text as a sample of how to write about death at a close distance. Students were asked to write their own scene based on the theme of being a voyeur of death; they had the option to write fiction, non-fiction, or non-fiction masked as fiction if it made them comfortable. As is common practice in my classroom, I would complete the writing tasks (especially one such as this that asked so much of the author), often starting the actual writing in front of them on a document camera, and share with students in order to model my expectations. I shared a piece I had written about one of my first students who had been murdered:

I remember when they found you. No one had told me, but I'd heard the whispers, like hissing snakes, in the hall. Everything moved

around me in that moment, a blur of liquid colors, moving so fast that all I could see was a blurry reflection of your face. My hand became stuck, poised on the doorknob and I was unable to tell if my body was shaking or if I was dizzy, probably both. A thousand hands, raw and desperate, pressed on my chest until I was forced to exhale, forced to remember where I was, what I needed to do, and who I needed to be. And I waited for someone to tell me, not wanting to believe it any other way. Wanting everything to be official and orderly because then no one could dispute it; no one could take you back. Two hours and 43 minutes. That's how long I waited for someone to approach me and tell me the news. Two hours and 47 minutes. That's when I felt my knees buckle, my weight disappear, my breath rush out only to get stuck somewhere between reality and the air I breathe.

That's when the hissing stopped and I finally listened. "No, they... they didn't find him." I felt his icy inhale scrape across my face. "It was...they....it was his hand. Well, his arm. They could tell by the tattoos. They just...found his arm."

When discussing the need for this writing time/space one student, Junior Medina, summarized it best by saying: "In my writing, I can scream as loud as I want."

It was equally nerve-racking and emotional, but I had to trust them as I asked them to trust me. After providing mentor texts, modeling writing, and countless practices in studying/developing voice, students, who had struggled with finding one word to define this very topic, were writing beautifully brutal pieces that showcased their voice:

His breath reeked of stale alcohol and his fingers cut into the flesh of her upper arms as he dragged her to her feet. Her tears flowed

as she stared back at him terrified, begging him to let her go. But her eyes silently begged him to finish this before it began. She never fought back in the past, but this time she didn't even try to protect herself. No arms raised in defense, no curling in a ball to lessen the blow. Nothing.

—Vanessa Sanchez

He left us without even thinking how we would deal with the after that comes after suicide. No note. No explanations. No reasons. And definitely no sorry. If there is no apology, is there blame? All that was left was his body. Hanging, neck tilted to the side like a broken dandelion, from the ceiling. Open eyes, open mouth, no tie like usual. He was wearing his work shoes, scuffed at the end, not like yesterday when everything was polished. “A man needs dress shoes for business if he’s to be taken seriously,” he would say. He must have scraped the shiny material against the chair as he kicked it away. He would be so disappointed if he were alive.

—Mario Perez

Students had developed authentic voices by continuing a never-ending cycle of reading, writing, and critically studying their words, as well as others’.

The Return Home: Meaningful Feedback & ReVision

“You can write that sentence in a way that you would have written it last year. Or you can write it in the way of the exquisite nuance that is writing in your mind now. But that takes a lot of ... waiting for the right word to come.”

—Joseph Campbell

Authentic voice has to be built on a solid foundation of authentic feedback. Any honest relationship is built upon a foundation of sharing one’s life, and yet, we often expect students to jump in and share their voice authentically simply because it is a requirement in a syllabus. As teachers, we have to build a solid relationship with our students if we want authentic communication in academic ways.

This is why, in my class, I make the

following commitments to my students and my pedagogy:

1. If I write “good job” or draw a smiley face on your work you receive automatic full credit on the assignment...and you get to point out my inauthenticity in class.
2. If you disagree with one of my comments/suggestions you have the right to throw it away (it is written on a post-it note, not on their writing) or schedule a conference with me to discuss the comments.
3. If I do or say something to discourage you as a writer and learner, please tell me. I promise it is unintentional, but you have the right to question me.

In addition to these commitments, I spend a great deal of time providing authentic feedback to students. This process is time consuming, so it is important to note what I don't do before I outline what I do. I do not read every draft of every piece.

I do not grade, thus eliminating a lot of complaining and comparison by both the teacher and the students. I do not correct their mistakes. Instead, I spend in-class writing time circling the class to read excerpts and drafts, giving feedback as I move around the room. Everyone is guaranteed one quick-read through and response on these days, and no one can call me away from another student.

I do not understand grading and how it can be anything but arbitrary, so I do not do it until the end of a grading period, when I am forced to, and even then it is usually a grade on which the student and I agree.

When I read their drafts, I only write on post-its, out of respect, to do the following: highlight a repeated grammatical error, providing a mentor sentence to show a correct way to use a technique, express how I reacted as a reader (what made me gasp, smile, crave more), and my response as a teacher of writing:

commenting on sentence structure, transitions, etc., always providing mentor texts if I am suggesting change.

When providing feedback, it is imperative to remember that one comment can change the confidence of a writer. By being authentic and transparent in my feedback, students do not have to seek my approval and can spend their energy writing authentically.

Revising writing is probably the aspect I struggle in teaching the most, simply because it is so time consuming. In addition to writing groups and my feedback, there are several revision strategies I found to promote authentic voice that are outlined in Kate Messener's *Real Revision*:

- Try It: Point of View—Re-writing a scene from different perspectives (147)
- Try It: Use Vivid Words—Revising “plain” language (243)
- Try It: Revise the Dialogue—Removing dialogue (or an excerpt that doesn't seem to work) from text to analyze consistency in tone/voice (251)
- Try It: Put Your Sentence on Trial—Cutting words, phrases, and sentences (253)

In the end, we also need to allow students, the same way we would allow our writer selves to take a step back and work on something else, to put the pencil down and just think, and to say a piece is finished, even when it is very much unfinished, because they simply need to move on. The most challenging, and refreshing, aspect of developing authentic voice as a writer is that the journey is cyclical; there will always be new life experiences and mentor texts to influence your writing just as there will always be an almost desperate need to reflect on how you could improve as a writer.

If, as teachers, we trust our students with strong mentor texts, purposeful audiences, uncensored choices, and encouragement to re-envision their

work, they will no doubt leave our classrooms as confident, independent, authentic life-long writers.

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SDAWP's Fall Conference—2012

Inspiring Student Writers

Demi Brown, SDAWP 2012



This year's Fall Conference was buzzing, not just with the excitement of teachers learning new ways to teach writing across content areas and through technology, but with cell phone vibrations when a new Tweet had been received. *Aha* moments, golden quotes, and questions for further thought and reflection vibrated in my pocket throughout the morning.



And we had plenty to Tweet about on hashtag #fallconference12.

Christine Kané opened the day with an insightful presentation on what it means to be a catalyst. One slide in particular resonated with me: Teachers in the room were asked to share what they want their students to be able to write in the year 2022, 2032, and 2042 (essentially in the forthcoming decades).

There was a moment of silence as teachers processed this before conversations about journals, technical career writing, and other real-world purposes ensued. Then, as Christine flipped to a new slide she asked, "Did this make your list?" —Teachers scanned the images of a hamburger paragraph, standardized writing test bubble sheets, multiple choice tests, sentence diagrams and daily oral language. As chuckles rumbled through the room, heads shook, "No!"

Christine skillfully culminated her presentation with a quote from author and educator Kelley Gallagher Dialogue, Fall 2012

that tied it all together, "Teaching writing begins with WHY to write, not HOW." As I headed to my first session, I was mindful of my own role as a catalyst for inspiring change—this might range from sharing ideas in passing conversations with colleagues to presenting during staff development meetings.

In Session 1C, teachers pulled out laptops, tablets, and smart phones as the presenters, Wendy Weisel-Bosworth and Ann Zivotsky, shared ideas for integrating writing and technology. Wendy began by sharing a variety of blogging platforms and left time for us to create our own accounts on blogger.com.

Ann shared how she uses Edmodo in her classroom, demonstrating how to set up small groups for digital writing response groups—no more paper copies of students' drafts. One eager attendee Tweeted, "WRG [Writing Response Groups] in Edmodo? Genius! How do you use it?" Opportunities to reflect on how to use Edmodo continued even after the presenters had shared their last slide.

For the second session, I stayed put in the technology room as Janet Ilko shared a digital story-telling strategy developed by her colleague, Trish d'Entremont. Teachers ranging from kindergarten to high school walked away from her session with engaging ideas for teaching the Speaking and Listening strand of the Common Core State Standards.

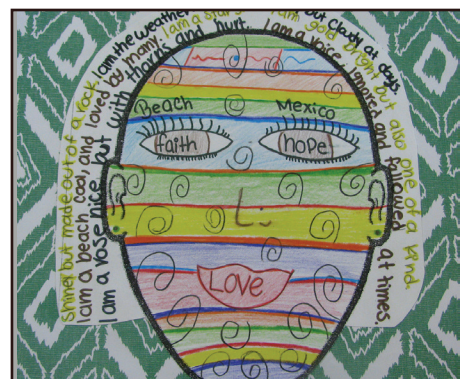
This particular story-telling strategy draws on a concept from Pecha Kucha, which shows images set to a narrator's voiceover. Janet shared some databases where students could find copyright free photos (Pics4learning.com), or they could use their own.

We viewed a model done by SDAWP fellow Matt Jewell and were moved by the intimacy of his bare voice rolling over the images. No music, no

other distractions—just Matt's spoken words and the visuals. Powerful! I can't wait to have my students feel and hear the power of their own stories, told in their words, with their own voices. Janet also shared ideas for making word self-portraits, a lesson adapted from *Rethinking Schools*. For this inspired activity, students take an outline of a face and decorate it with words in a variety of fonts, colors, and styles as they create their self-portraits—an artistic way for students to give voice to their identities.

I walked away from both of these presentations with online resources to peruse and new tools to enhance my curriculum. I can only imagine the interesting information that was shared in the other rooms.

While I camped out in the technology sessions, other SDAWP presenters were sharing writing across content areas, analytical writing, revising, and ways to increase reading comprehension through poetry. It was hard to choose between all the offerings available at this sold-out Fall Conference, but I definitely made the right selections for me.



As the day came to a close and the Tweets for hashtag #fallconference12 stopped buzzing through my pocket, the collaboration with other educators on Twitter was just beginning. You too can join the conversation about the teaching of writing by following @SDAWP_fellow and others who use #sdawp in their Tweets.

(The word portrait examples included above were created by Janet Ilko's students at Cajon Valley Middle School where she teaches 6th grade.)



AUTHENTIC VOICE

HEATHER BICE, SDAWP 2011

Margarita sang her writing today. Just because, she said, she felt inspired.

We laughed together. Last week we cried as a class when Carmela read about Casey.

Sometimes, I do not know how this community is built. I reflect with awe at the things my students have been brave enough to share with me.

I STRUGGLED WITH ENCOURAGING MY STUDENTS TO TAKE THE RISKS IN THEIR WRITING THAT WOULD SHOWCASE THE DEEP, REAL, RAW STORIES I KNEW THEY HAD INSIDE THEM.

During my teaching career, I have tried all types of tools to “show” authentic voice. Some were helpful to a degree, but nothing resulted in the richer products I sought.

I struggled with encouraging my students to take the risks in their writing that would showcase the deep, real, raw stories I knew they had inside them.

I have found only one “strategy” and I discovered it by accident. It is pretty simple: you build the community by constructing it side by side.

Model it. Be it. Embrace it.

When I began sharing my writing with my students, I noticed that their writing became more revealing, more creative, more in depth.

And by no means is this because I am a terrific writer.

My students would always agree that the mentor texts I provided were well written but struggled to emulate models in a way that felt like their own. I started making a stronger effort to write with them, every time. I would ask for their opinions, show them my scribbling, re-read a

piece I re-worked again and again and again. I began to notice that, slowly, my students would share more, more often. What they would share was more authentic, riskier, and richer than ever before. In part, their writing evolved because my students could see me walk through the process of writing, too.

Authentic voice in the classroom has to happen organically. Anything else would be inauthentic. I cannot

expect my students to confront, let alone share, real emotions and experiences without first baring my own.

Below is a piece I wrote in class about my family as my students worked on their own.

After 5:30, if my dad calls, I know he will have that familiar slur. His words will be thick, his voice aged; he will ask me the same perfunctory questions: How's the weather? What did I do today? What am I having for dinner? Almost immediately, he won't remember the answers and he might repeat the questions.

I LAID EVERYTHING ON THE TABLE: THE HATRED, THE HURT, THE FEAR HE WOULD DIE. I EXPECTED HIM TO DENY IT ALL AS HE HAD DONE WITH OTHERS WHO CONFRONTED HIM.

Six years ago, I wouldn't have answered the phone at this time. Now, I usually do. It has been a long road to accepting my father's addiction to alcohol, but I'm finally at a place where I can separate my father—the man I love—from his addiction. Of course I wish it were different, but accepting what

I cannot change has allowed me to build a healthy relationship with Dad.

I have only fleeting memories of my childhood with Dad that one could consider happy: four-year-old me running to greet him at the door as he returned from night class, picking giant mushrooms in the fields outside of town, the way he would tear up every time I went to a school dance in a sparkly dress. Unfortunately, when I think of my childhood, I can more readily recall the sad or even scary memories: so many yelling matches between my parents I cannot differentiate among them, vomit on the walls, my father cussing out a boy on our first date.

By fifteen, I nearly ignored my father outright. We spoke only superficially until I was over twenty years old.

When I was near graduating college, I had to stop pretending. I had a blunt, uncomfortable, and emotional conversation with my father about his alcoholism. I grew tired of shouldering the anger. I laid everything on the table: the hatred, the hurt, the fear he would die. I expected him to deny it all as he had done with others who confronted him. I thought he would place blame elsewhere, as he had always done in the past.

I was wrong.

I didn't expect my father, who despite everything was a man I worshipped, to look at the ground, to hang his head in shame, to say he didn't blame me for hating him. It was at that moment that I came

face to face with the demons my father had been drowning all those years. Something clicked and I saw my dad for himself instead of whom I wanted him to be.

That conversation wasn't a solution to everything but it did allow me to begin the journey to under-

standing, a key component to moving forward with our relationship. My father continues to drink. In rare moments, like that conversation, he will concede his addiction. I still carry a lot of disappointment, but the caustic hate I once let consume me is gone, something I realize I needed to let happen for my own emotional health.

I've asked my father not to call me when he is drunk. Sometimes he forgets and calls me anyway.

Sometimes I do not answer.

But, unlike in the past, sometimes I do.

**THEY WILL NEED TEACHERS WHO CONTINUOUSLY
SEEK OUT METHODS AND RESOURCES TO
IMPROVE THEIR CRAFT IN THE NAME
OF STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT.**

When I share my own writing with my classes, I model classroom community by embracing the discomfort I feel. I attempt to show them that fear can be conquered.

I admit I am apprehensive, underconfident, and nervous, but I don't cower. I confront those feelings and embrace that sharing my writing makes me uncomfortable but that being uncomfortable is okay. We get over it. But before I can ask them to get over it, I had to.

So here I am, getting over it. Submitting my own work makes me feel vulnerable and self-conscious but I keep my word. And more and more often, they follow suit.

(Carmela's writing follows, with her permission.)

In This Kingdom by the Sea

I never saw the rocks as a beautiful place to get your picture taken. The black, uneven collection of large pebbles is covered in sand, tourists, and kelp flies. The trek from the rather clean sidewalk causes my pair of faded Converse to be filled with the crushed shells and minerals that cover nearly every beach in the world. My shaking hands grab onto the uneven edges and clamber up to the only true flat surface on the serpent. The lookout point is

several feet above the water even at high tide. My legs either dangle off the edge or cross underneath me as I stare into the wide blue yonder and talk to him.

This was the last place I saw his body. It had gone from the long, slender frame I loved so much to a black and gray powder. The lips I kissed, and the hands I held were nothing but ash now. I don't know what part of him I was holding in that cigar box but my fingers were attached tightly. His parents and his siblings each got a bag to throw in. Luckily, they were dissolvable. My boyfriend's ashes were going to be free from their manufactured

prison and out into the whole wide world. The sunset turned the ocean waves into a coal black as the parade of mourners walked as far up as they could into the low tide. I wasn't crying. He would have hated to see me cry.

His dad put his bag in first. A Navy Marine, this was the only time I had ever seen him close to tears. The siblings pretended to be none the wiser and clambered over the rocks like ants desperate to flee an attack. The older, emotionless man turned to me. My hands shared custody over the cigar box. And a white rose my mom demanded we buy. A present to the parted.

I didn't want to slide back the lid and let him go. He was once a human being. He was smiling, laughing. Very much alive. It seemed like I had blinked and now he was the residue of fire. My breath hitched in my throat as I prepared for his dismount. A quick little speech and suddenly he and white petals were bonding with the salt water. I forgot to give him a final kiss because I didn't want to cry in front of his dad. I didn't want to seem weak.

I've returned almost every week since. I feel closest to him on that perch. As my eyes scan the horizon I remember everything we did together. Our first date, our first

kiss. Whenever he would make a stupid face. I love him now just as I did then. He just isn't here to hear me say it.

Loss in life is ever present. Whether it is in small instances like an earring or larger ones like death, it's there. Life can only give you happiness for so long. The real fact that it is unfair hovers in the distance behind the shroud. When it was pulled back my entire life fell into pieces. My future. It seems grief will always be an emotion I possess, even if I hide it.

Every weekend I go to our kingdom by the sea, and I speak to him. I tell him I love him, and I remember.



A Poem

I wrote
because I could not speak.
They tied my tongue at birth
Over-loaded the synapses
From mind to mouth
Made sure I could not
Utter a syllable
But they made a fatal mistake
My hands worked just fine
And the entire world could flow
From my chaotic mind
To the pen in my hand
Every word trapped
Within my head
Every dream,
Every fear,
Every thought
Stained the paper black
So I wrote.
Wrote it all,
And escaped the clutches of those
Who wanted to silence me
from birth.
I wrote it all
because I could not speak.

—Kira Elliot
Young Writers' Camp TA
Summer 2012

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Painting Words

A brush dipped
in word paint
then splattered
on your paper hard
Just be yourself
Go wild and free
Paint like you never have before
Now, that's a masterpiece
—Maya Wu

I Love Writing

I love writing
I love how
writing consumes me
I love the way
it scares me
and makes me laugh
I love the way
it teaches me
about reality,
history, and science
I love how
my characters change
my emotions
I love the settings
whether it be an
enchanted castle,
dark forest
or faraway galaxy
I love writing

—Mia Redelings

The Silvers

Amanda says she's got the silvers. The shiny
leotard, dance after school silvers, stars shining
in my eyes silvers. The silvers that make you want
to take the next rocket to Mars.

—Eliana Meza-Ehlert



Pictured above: A camper took a moment to jot down ideas in her writer's notebook. Upper left: Young writers of all ages worked together during cross-age collaboration sessions. Lower left: A group of campers showed off their YWC T-shirts on the last day of camp.

Writing Archery

I visualize a story
in my mind

Ideas dancing
like targets in the distance

Pulling a pencil
from my sheath...

Pull, aim, fire.

I hold my breath
the pencil spirals
through details of the story
gaining speed
as the yarn
is woven

Bull's-eye stricken
Amazing story unfolds
writing archery

Pull, aim, fire.

—Fiama Albarrán



Campers found inspiration in the singing and talking Trees, sculptures in UCSD's Stewart Art Collection.



Young Writers' in Nature participants enjoyed the view from the bluff as they explored the Scripps Coastal Reserve.

Raised by Books

I was raised by
adventure-seeking
magic, flying
clashing swords
old, obscure words
kind of books

I was raised by
real life
school-cool problems,
bullies, teachers,
new-old friends
type of books

Witty, bright,
sarcastic bite
cynical twists
trying to fight
sad stories,
deal with life
sorts of books

Some reign, some rule
daggers and alliances
building power
manipulating rules

Happy, light

in the darkest night
don't give up
without a fight,
be free, be yourself
friendship will win the day
kind of stories

Studying, observing,
habits and quirks
animals, plants
how everything works
the way of the universe
those kind of books

Sad stories
heart-breaking
soul-shaking
hope-making
no more taking
sorts of stories

Deep, long
let's get along
sing a song
how the world should be
you, you and me
kind of books.

—Shivank Nayak

An Educators' Journey through Writing Response Groups

Cynthia Larkin, SDAWP 2011

My decision to participate in the San Diego Area Writing Project's 2011 Summer Institute (SI) did not come easily. A colleague of mine had been encouraging me to participate in the SI for several years; she even had my letter of recommendation typed up and ready to go. But each year I gave her excuse after excuse for why I could not participate. The excuses I provided varied from year to year. *I have to work summer school in order to make some extra money. I will do it next year. Or I just need a break*

But the real reason why I did not want to participate in the SI? I was scared. Even though I am a high school English teacher who teaches writing, I did not consider myself a writer in any shape or form.

this summer. It's been a rough year. Maybe next summer.

But the real reason why I did not want to participate in the SI? I was scared. Even though I am a high school English teacher who teaches writing, I did not consider myself a writer in any shape or form. I am not a teacher who has a personal blog that I update daily. Or a teacher who writes poetry for fun. Or a teacher who can seamlessly spill beautiful and eloquent words on a piece of paper within a matter of minutes.

I am that teacher who struggles with writing. Writing does not come easily for me and never has. When looking at a blank screen or piece of paper, it takes some time for the words to come. And when they do come, they do not flow in the order I want them to. I am constantly writing and rereading, adding and deleting, erasing and revising, never feeling confident about the process or the results.

The thought of having to share my writing with a group of educators and then be judged by the way I wrote terrified me. I also felt like a hypocrite. Here I stood, afraid to

share my writing with my peers, knowing that I make my students do this all the time. Switch your paper with your peers, I'd casually command. Never truly stopping to even contemplate how my students must feel about sharing their writing with their classmates. These thoughts had never crossed my mind.

When I received my SI acceptance letter with instructions that I had to bring in a piece of personal writing on the first day of the SI, all of my

fears came crashing down. The letter stated, "...plan to bring six copies of a piece of your own writing. This should be a piece of writing that is not yet done and that would benefit from response from your peers.... It might be the piece you wrote at our pre-Institute day, a poem, a story from your classroom, or..." A

I chose to read my piece first—not because I was so excited to share my writing—I went first out of fear of having my writing compared to the writing of the others in my group.

sick feeling formed in the pit of my stomach. What do they expect me to bring? How long does it have to be? What am I going to write about? I did find some solace, however, in knowing that I could share any type of writing. It was at least my choice. Despite my anxiety, fear, and inhibition, I showed up on day one with six copies of a piece of writing to share.

Keeping true to the style and fashion of my students, I did not begin writing my piece until the night before it was due. I was able to eke out two pages, double-spaced. I thought this

length would be sufficient. I chose to write a personal narrative piece about my hair.

The Summer Institute

The next morning, I was placed in a group with four other group members, including the director of the Writing Project. I immediately felt intimidated and my blood pressure rose a bit. I hope this piece I wrote will be good enough.

After we determined the norms for our writing response group (WRG), it was time for us to share. I chose to read my piece first—not because I was so excited to share my writing—I went first out of fear of having my writing compared to the writing of the others in my group.

I read my narrative out loud. Then I nervously waited while my group members reviewed my piece. I furtively glanced at each of my group members' copy. Everyone's copy had writing on it. I wondered what they thought. I sat patiently, anxiously, awaiting their feedback. Each per-

son began with what I did well. Their comments ranged from "I love the detail you used to describe the process of getting your hair relaxed" to "This part of your story is very visual." Every single group member had something positive to say. They actually liked my narrative. They asked me questions and offered suggestions to help me make my piece stronger. "Why did you need your hair straightened? Can you define straightened and curly for your readers? What does scratching do to the scalp? What did the relaxer smell like?" All of this positive feed-

back and constructive criticism was amazing. As I listened to their feedback, my chest began to poke out a bit. My head began to rise a little. My confidence as a writer began to emerge.

During the duration of the SI, WRGs met several times. Every week, we were responsible for either bringing in revised copies of our writing or brand new pieces; the choice was up to us. It all depended on the feedback we felt we needed. I had never participated in a group quite like this. We wrote and revised. We offered feedback and received it. We struggled and triumphed. At the end

We wrote and revised. We offered feedback and received it. We struggled and triumphed. At the end of the SI, I was closer to my WRG members than any of the other participants.

of the SI, I was closer to my WRG members than any of the other participants. We had become this small, intimate community. My group members knew more about me than any of the other participants. An undeniable bond had been formed.

As I continued meeting in my WRG, I knew I had to bring this experience back to my classroom. There was something powerful about a WRG, and I wanted my students to experience this. I knew that implementing WRGs in my classroom would help to address some of the shortcomings in my writing program. Students would write more, and have more freedom in choosing writing topics and genres they cared about. Students would write for a specific purpose and for an authentic audience. They would continually revisit their writing for the purpose of revising it and improving each piece.

Even though I believed in the power of writing response groups, I wondered if this could work with my students. Are students capable of providing authentic feedback to each other? Would they actually improve as writers? Could writing response groups build their confidence as writers? Are they capable of taking an activity like this seriously? I wasn't exactly sure if this would work, but I was determined to give it a try.

Dialogue, Fall 2012

I decided that I was going to implement writing response groups in the fall. I reached out to a couple of SI participants in order to get some assistance with how to implement WRGs. Darren, a 10th grade English teacher at Point Loma High School was interested, and so was Jan, a professor at San Diego City College. The three of us met up after we completed the SI in order to figure out how we could bring WRGs to our classrooms. We shared ideas and resources, as well as our questions and inhibitions.

We found various articles on the National Writing Project's website

about other teachers using writing response groups in their classrooms. *The Elbow Room: Tweaking Response in the Secondary Classroom* by Anne Marie Liebel discussed her experience with WRGs and provided great strategies for forming and rotating group members; she also pro-

Are students capable of providing authentic feedback to each other? Would they actually improve as writers? Could writing response groups build their confidence as writers? Are they capable of taking an activity like this seriously?

vided some troubleshooting tips. Brian Slusher's *Praising, Questioning, Wishing: An Approach to Responding to Writing* provided an excellent strategy for teaching students how to effectively respond to one another. It was great to see that other teachers were also using WRGs in their classroom with success. Using these articles and other materials from the Internet, I gained a clear understanding of what a WRG is and some ideas for implementation.

Prior to the start of school, I prepared a writing response group reference sheet for my students. It explained the types of writing they could share, how often groups would meet, how they would receive points, and tips for responders and authors.

Bringing Writing Response Groups to My Classroom

It was important for me to start the year off with WRGs in order to create some accountability for myself. It's so easy for some teachers to fall back into their old routines once the school year begins. I was afraid this would happen to me. So on the second day of school, I excitedly introduced writing response groups to my students. We were going to have our first WRG that following week.

I began by explaining what a WRG is: a group of 3-5 individuals who read and respond to each other's writing. Each member of the group brings in a piece of writing for the purpose of sharing their writing with group members. Taking turns, each member reads his piece aloud.

Responding group members follow along on their copy as the writer reads his piece. After the writer has read his piece aloud to the group, the responders are given a few moments to go back over their copy of the piece and record their reactions. Every group member has to respond to the writer's piece in some form.

Because I wanted my students to come as close to the experience I had in the SI, I gave them very few guidelines about the first piece they would bring in for their WRG. They were told to bring in four copies (I decided on four-member groups) of a piece of writing. The only stipulation: it must be a piece of writing they wanted feedback on in order to make the writing better. It did not have to be a newly written piece. It could be newly written for the purpose of sharing in the WRG or it could be a previously written piece, writing they had completed in their last year's English class or a current work in progress.

Many of them gave me questioning looks. They wanted me to clarify that they did NOT have to write

something new. They seemed a bit relieved by this. For some of them, I could tell that they were happy that they did not have to produce anything new or have to follow any stringent guidelines. I had to reiterate that even though they did not have to write something new, they should choose a piece that they truly wanted feedback on—they were going to have to make revisions to whatever writing they brought into their WRG.

Some students were concerned about not being “good” writers; they were scared of being judged or laughed at by their peers. Some students were insecure about reading their writing out loud.

Another student wanted to know if she could bring in a poem she had written. Another wanted to know if he could bring in some rap lyrics. The answer to all of their questions was YES!

For homework that night, I asked them to write about any concerns they might have about participating in a WRG. They had many. Some students were concerned about not being “good” writers; they were scared of being judged or laughed at by their peers. Some students were insecure about reading their writing out loud. And a majority of students were concerned about providing authentic feedback; they were not confident in their ability to help their peers improve their writing. I could definitely relate to some of their fears and inhibitions because I had once been in their shoes.

Teaching Students How to Respond

Writing response groups are not designed for participants to mainly focus on each other’s lack of punctuation or incorrect use of grammar. The purpose is for students to provide meaningful feedback on the content of the writing and not on the mechanics (even though the mechanics of writing are important, too).

When participating in peer editing sessions or any type of response group, students struggle with providing authentic and meaningful feedback to one another—they tend

to focus on their peers’ punctuation. They default to comments about punctuation or grammar because they have not been explicitly taught otherwise.

So before my students brought in their first piece, I knew that I would have to teach them HOW to respond. This is the most critical step in implementing writing response groups. If students lack the skills to properly respond to one another, their writing

response group could be disastrous. I began by telling them about my experience with writing response groups during the Summer Institute. I shared my initial fears and concerns. A couple of students voiced that they were shocked that an English teacher was scared to share her writing. Many of them felt comfort in knowing that I, too, was initially

A couple of students voiced that they were shocked that an English teacher was scared to share her writing. Many of them felt comfort in knowing that I, too, was initially fearful of participating in a WRG.

fearful of participating in a WRG. I believe it is important to let your students know that their teachers have fears and struggles, especially when it comes to writing. Most students think that writing comes easily and naturally for their teachers. And this was definitely not the case for me.

For the purpose of showing my students what authentic and meaningful feedback looks like, I brought in multiple drafts of the narrative I wrote about my hair. It was important for my students to see the process and understand the impact a writing response group had on my writing. Using the document camera, I displayed the first draft of my piece with the comments from each individual group member. I asked them to tell me what they noticed about the comments I received.

They noticed that two of my group members used symbols (happy

faces to show they liked something and question marks to show they were confused or needed clarity). They noticed that they made comments and asked questions in the margins, and their comments and questions mainly focused on my use of details and imagery. (I told them this was purposeful. Prior to sharing my piece with group members, I asked them to focus on my use of details and imagery. This was what I felt I needed help with.) And a few students noticed that my group members did not focus on my use of grammar or punctuation.

I then asked them to focus on the changes I made to my first draft based on my group members’ comments. When observing the differences from my first draft to my revised drafts, they noticed several changes: a completely new introduction, the piece was much longer in length; and there was richer imagery and details. I had followed the advice of my group members.

I asked for a brave volunteer in each period to email me a piece of their

writing the next day so that I could use their piece for the purpose of modeling how to provide meaningful feedback in front of the whole class. Four students agreed to email me their writing. I made a class set of each student’s writing so that all of the students in the class had their own personal copy of their peer’s writing directly in front of them. Each student needed to be able to follow along as each writer read his piece, providing feedback directly on their peer’s copy.

Using Brian Slusher’s “Praising, Questioning, Wishing” approach, we practiced providing meaningful feedback. Each student had a hand-out that included a list of sample sentence stems to help them with the language I wanted them to use when giving feedback. Even though I gave them a guideline, I knew they needed to see and hear me provide meaningful feedback to a peer’s

writing.

We first discussed the importance of giving specific praise; always begin your discussions with what the writer does well, but be specific in what you tell them. Don't just say this is "good." A writer wants to hear why it is good. And even if a piece needs major work, it's still important to find something that they did well.

Don't just say this is "good." A writer wants to hear why it is good. And even if a piece needs major work, it's still important to find something that they did well.

I like how you use ____ to show ____.
This word/phrase stands out for me because ____.
These lines are effective because ____.

Next, we reviewed questioning. While reading your peer's paper, you might find yourself unclear about why they wrote "this," or what they meant by "that." Making direct statements may put the writer on the defensive. However, if you pose your statement in the form of a question, it's a less threatening way to get the writer to think about your comment more deeply. *I was a little confused by ____.* *Can you tell me more? I wondered why ____?*

We then focused on providing feedback on what the writer could improve. We all acknowledged that sometimes people lack the necessary skills for properly giving constructive feedback. The wish approach was the solution to this problem. The word wish has a positive connotation. Instead of telling the writer that they need to change something, using the wish approach allows the responder to offer constructive criticism without sounding like they are an authority figure. *I wish you would tell me more about ____.* *I wish ____.* *You should consider ____.*

Now it was time to put the entire class through a writing response group. Prior to reading their piece aloud, I asked each writer to tell us what he/she wanted the class to focus on while reading. We discussed the importance of coming to a WRG with a general understanding of what we wanted feedback on. Each writer read their piece out loud. As the class followed along, I told them

that each person needed to mark up their copy. As the writer read his piece, they were to identify something the writer did well, ask a clarifying question, and find something the writer could improve upon. All of their responses had to follow the praise, question, wish format.

The modeling/practice went well. With the exception of one student,

all of them used the praise, question, wish approach. And for the one student who did not quite get it, my other students were quick to tell him that he should have phrased that specific suggestion in the form of a question or used the wish approach. They were ready to try this out on their own.

...my students were not focusing on punctuation and grammar. They were focusing on the content of the writer's piece. They were engaged in discussions about the writer's use of imagery, word choice, figurative language, etc.

Writing Response Groups in Action

To keep myself and my students accountable, I decided to have a WRG every other Thursday. I told students that this was going to be the norm and that they should be prepared to meet twice a month. They agreed that twice a month was definitely doable, and several seemed excited about participating in one.

I even received an email from a student on the second day of school. Her email read: "Hi. Ms. Larkin. I'm Sakura from your 6th period. I wanted to tell you that I am excited about the Writing Response Groupings. However, sadly, I do not have a printer and it said in one of your handouts that I can turn it in to you for printing my work instead. I attached my work in this message because I am unsure if its length would be a problem. I'm sorry if I come off as demanding for suddenly springing this on you. But I sincerely am looking forward to the WRG." I was

so incredibly excited to receive this email. YES! At least one student was seriously looking forward to participating in a writing response group. I had more confidence in my ability to make this work.

As noted in Sakura's email, some of my students have printer issues and paper issues. In order to knock out ALL excuses for NOT having their four copies for their WRG, I offered to print the copies for them as long as they emailed their piece to me before the WRG.

The morning of our first WRG, I had over 40 emails from students. I was a little overwhelmed at first. They emailed short stories, letters, poems, essays, and journal entries. I printed out a copy of each student's writing and headed to the copy room.

I was expecting that a few of my students would not have their pieces ready for our first writing response

group. I was prepared to have a discussion with these students about the importance of our writing response groups, and explain that they were not going away. But to my surprise, every single student had a piece of writing to share on our first day. Every single student! I was elated.

For our first WRG, I decided to walk around, listening in on the comments and feedback that students gave. I was pleased to hear them using the praise, question, wish approach. Their papers were annotated with symbols and meaningful comments.

Some students still needed assistance with providing meaningful feedback, but my students were not focused on punctuation and grammar. They were focusing on the content of the writer's piece and were engaged in discussions about the writer's use of imagery, word choice, figurative language, etc.

Life after the First WRG

When I initially decided to implement writing response groups, I did not necessarily think about

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and intimate bonds with one another.
We had indeed become a community of writers.*

how WRGs would impact my lesson plans. It was shocking to see the impact that two days out of the month had on my planning. Implementing WRGs did take away time from a unit. I was not able to cover the amount of materials that I was used to covering in previous years.

Approximately six weeks after implementing WRGs, I slacked off a bit. I was trying to play catch up within one of my units. I had been adamant about reminding students of an upcoming WRG so they would not forget.

One week I made a unilateral decision to forego the Thursday WRG session so that we could finish working on another assignment. I honestly did not think that my students would even remember that we were supposed to have a WRG. I was so wrong.

Even though I had not reminded them, several students showed up with copies of their writing. When I told them that I had decided to skip the session this day, some students pushed back. "You said that we were going to have one every other Thursday. Today is Thursday and I already have my copies made. Why aren't we meeting today?" Wow! They were right. I had set the expectations for writing response groups and they were determined to make me stick to it. WRGs were here to stay.

Final Thoughts

It was at that very moment I realized the importance of breaking the chains of control and allowing my students to have the freedom to just write.

Over the course of the school year, my students participated in numerous writing response groups. I wasn't able to stick to my every other

Thursday schedule, but we had a WRG at least once a month. This was the first year that my students wrote more, without my having to grade more. They wrote about top-

ics that they cared about, and freely wrote within genres they loved and not genres I loved.

The responsibility of reading and revising and providing feedback was now shared with my students. Instead of my students viewing me

as the sole authority on writing, they realized that their peers had something to offer them as well.

And over time, their confidence as writers increased. Instead of a couple of students volunteering to participate in Author's Chair (an activity for sharing one's writing), dozens of students volunteered. My students were proud of their writing and felt confident to share their writing with their classmates. Over time, we all formed closer and intimate bonds with one another. We had indeed become a community of writers.



PROJECT NOTES

Congratulations to Shannon Falkner (SDAWP 2008). Shannon's article "Signs of Life" in the *High School Classroom: Analyzing Popular Culture to Provide Student Choice in Analytical Writing* was recently published in the *English Journal* [101.2 (2011): 44-49]. She was also chosen to receive the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Farmer Award which is given to only two contributors each year. Shannon left our region two years ago to return to New Jersey where she teaches English at Chatham High School.

Best wishes to Lucy Rothlisberger who is now the ELA Facilitator for the Cajon Valley Union School District. She is responsible for the roll out of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and spends her time coordinating professional development and visiting sites to support teachers.

Kudos to Sabrina Youmans (SDAWP 1999) and Cali Linfor (SDAWP 2001), who recently had their first books of poetry published in a collection entitled *Lantern Tree: Four Books of Poems* (City Works Press). For more information and to read some of their poems, visit the website at <http://lanternree.us/>.

Good luck to Jacob Ruth (SDAWP 2011). Jacob has taken a position as Assistant Principal at Emerald Middle School in the Cajon Valley Union School District. Emerald is a STEM Magnet School, focusing on Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics.

Way to go, Linda Whiteside (SDAWP 1994). Linda was featured in TEDx America's Finest City 2012 Conference at the La Jolla Playhouse where she told a true story called "Step Aside for the Competition" about the amazing volunteer dogs in the canine therapy program at Rady Children's Hospital. You can find the video by searching YouTube for Linda Whiteside.

Stay in Touch If you are an SDAWP Fellow and would like to get regular updates about SDAWP events, please send us your email. Visit our website at <http://sdawp.ucsd.edu> and go to the 'Contact Us' link, or email us at: sdawp@ucsd.edu. We would love to add you to our eList!!!

"Like us" on Facebook for SDAWP news and event information. Links to writing resources and research articles are posted regularly, offering a wealth of ideas for curriculum design and implementation. www.facebook.com/SDAWP

We don't know about you, but there was a moment, a week or so into the Summer Institute, when we felt like buildings that had been stripped down to the studs. Between readings and protocols that challenged our beliefs with regard to our roles as educators and many *aha* moments (as in, "Aha! No wonder that didn't work"), we found ourselves wondering now what? Then the rebuilding process began. We heard peers grappling with dilemmas similar to those faced in our own practices, gleaned new strategies from the demonstration lessons presented, and began rethinking our approaches to the teaching of writing.

We've never recaptured the heady mix of introspection and inspiration that those four weeks were for us. We try, as many fellows do, by participating in study groups and attending SDAWP conferences. Yet, we have to admit that we're there for the opportunity to sit in a room full of kindred spirits as much as for the presentations themselves—fabulous though they may be.

It's hard to stay connected. Teachers complete the Summer Institute every year, then return to their classrooms. What happens then? It's time we opened up a window into what happens in the SDAWP fellows' classrooms—throw open the sash, lean out, and gossip with our neighbors about what is working in our classrooms, reflecting on the challenges we face, and supporting one another as we strive to improve the quality of the teaching of writing in San Diego County.

Enter SDAWP *Voices*, a blog that we have created with the aim of doing just that: www.sdawpvoices.com. We have preliminary structures in place—categories, tags, widgets, and post formats, and we have started posting. Here's a snapshot of posts made by SDAWP fellows this month:

- Math in the Content Area—*The Election, Graphs and Writing* by Mindy Shacklett
- Technology in the Classroom—*iPads Ate My First Trimester* by Matt Jewell
- Mentor Texts—*Mentor Text Takes on a New Look* by Janet Ilko, and the *Mentor Text Mondays* series by Barb Montfort
- National Day on Writing—*Let's Celebrate Writing Every Day!* by Kim Douillard

The key to SDAWP *Voices*, however, is bringing together *all* of our voices. We are asking you to take part. The collective knowledge and experience in our SDAWP lives begs to be shared. Not sure where to begin? Try one (or more!) of these ideas.

- Subscribe—Find the "Subscribe to Blog via Email" section on the right hand sidebar. Enter your email address to receive notices when new posts are published.
- Comment—Add your voice to posts. Just click on the "Leave a Response" link by the title of each post, or click on the post and enter your comment at the end of the post.
- Contribute—Email Matt Jewell or Barb Montfort to sign up. This sounds like a big step, but take the plunge! You might have an idea of something you want to say already. If not, here are some ideas:
 1. Writing in the Content Areas—History? Science? Math? Art?
 2. Mentor Text Mondays—have a great mentor text lesson? Send it to Barb Montfort to be posted on *Mentor Text Mondays*, or post your own!
 3. Start a weekly series—Tech Tip Tuesdays? Weekly Book Reviews?
 4. Writing about using technology in the classroom—share your learning as well as your students'
 5. A Day in the Life—share a day in your classroom, an hour, a moment
 6. Call to Action—get the word out about a project or event
 7. Success Stories—share your successes or those of a colleague
 8. Teacher Writing—share your own writing

Consider this *your* invitation to take part in SDAWP *Voices*. Open the window into your classroom and share your voice!



Dialogue

Call for Manuscripts

**Spring 2013 Issue
Submission Deadline:
March 3, 2013**

Writing "Right": on Rules

Between style manuals, writing conventions, formulaic writing guides, APA and MLA formatting, and the demands of conforming to on-demand writing structures, we and our students are beholden to many forms of "writing rules."

How do you balance guiding students to follow formats which assist them, and nurturing original expressions and creative writing?

Describe how you've found instructional middle grounds, developed mini-lessons, moved students past predictable writing structures and arguments, and prepared students for writing tasks in the real world. While you're at it, share examples of your and your students' writing that "breaks the rules."

Dialogue would like to receive your work or the work of your students. Submit a story of student success, a strategy for implementation, or a personal essay on your teaching experience.

Email all manuscript submissions, suggestions, letters to the editor and/or Project Notes to

Jenny Moore at
jenny4moore@hotmail.com
or to Stacey Goldblatt at
moonbeam5@cox.net

The Literary Canon and My Students:

Making the Connections

Breanne Lagomarsino, SDAWP 2012

A new school year. A new school. I walk into the English department chair's classroom to discuss the curriculum map for 9th grade. She hands me the list of required reading. I scan the list. The usual suspects are all there: *The Odyssey*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Lord of the Flies*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I scan the list again for the optional reading list: *Night* and *House on Mango Street*. Sandra Cisneros' *House on Mango Street* represents the one book written by an author who is not white and the only book that was written in the past thirty decades (published in 1984). It is my seventh year of teaching high school English language arts and once again I am confronted with teaching texts from the literary canon (with a few optional texts in between).

**I want my students
to love reading,
to open a book
looking for the
underlying themes,
and how these
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Every year, at each school where I have taught, I have received a list much like the one above, and every year I wonder how I will make the literature relevant to my students. I know that these texts have important ideas and themes that can connect with my students; however, many of the books turn students off immediately because of their antiquated language (*The Odyssey* and *Romeo and Juliet*) or their excessive use of symbolism (*Lord of the Flies*). I want my students to love reading, to open a book looking for the underlying themes, and how these themes relate to their lives. I want them to see themselves in each of the characters

and their conflicts, but this task is difficult when students are forced to read literature that they don't find pertinent to their experiences.

I often wonder why many high schools insist that students read the canon. As Burke (1993) said, "what we are doing by offering such old, used goods is saying to students that nothing has been written since *Lord of the Flies* that is worth reading; we are saying that life as we know it in the United States has not changed..." (57). I want my students to understand that there are many modern books worth reading, but I also understand that the literary canon offers students a look at the classics and that it is important that they understand these too. Therefore, I am left with the dilemma of how to make my canon-centered curriculum relevant to my students, because as Burke (1993) tells us:

Students look to literature, as we all do, to discover themselves in it, and to experience different dimensions of the human condition that they may or may not realize they are a part of. What the majority of students see is that their world, their reality, is not worthy of literature, is not worthy of study. Nearly every work they encounter puts them on the outside, forces them to feel that it is irrelevant to their lives (58).

A desire for my students to feel the literature is relevant, a desire for them to see themselves in the literature: thus began my quest to bring life to the dusty book covers of the canon.

After a brief short-fiction unit, which also featured antiquated stories (mainly centered around death, a cheery subject for the start of the year!) we began to read *The Odyssey*. As this was my first time teaching the epic poem, I approached it us-

ing a lens of myth: We must read *The Odyssey* in order to understand myths and mythology, which are important to our society today because...this is where I had trouble. My students and I were enjoying the mythical stories in Homer's masterpiece; however, many of the stories were far removed from their lives. Take for instance this excerpt from book XI when Odysseus visits the underworld:

Here Perimedes and Eurylochus held the victims, while I drew my sword and dug the trench a cubit each way. I made a drink-offering to all the dead, first with honey and milk, then with wine, and thirdly with water, and I sprinkled white barley meal over the whole, praying earnestly to the poor feckless ghosts, and promising them that when I got back to Ithaca I would sacrifice a barren heifer for them, the best I had, and would load the pyre with good things.

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The boys loved the violence in this passage, but had no real connection to it. I decided that my students needed a focus, a way to extract the main themes of the story and apply these themes to their own lives. I began by thinking about the bigger picture; *The Odyssey* is a story about a journey or a quest and many of my students, in only 14 years, had been on some pretty amazing journeys. Our high school is located in a Navy town; about 50% of my students had

Dialogue, Fall 2012

parents in the military, which meant that they had spent most of their life moving around. I saw a perfect connection there.

Using an online program, my students created timelines depicting their own journeys through life. Many of my students liked this assignment as it gave them a chance to talk about themselves and explore important events in their lives. The assignment allowed me to get to know the students better. But beyond the basic premise that it was connecting them to the idea of a journey in *The Odyssey*, I did not see the students making the kind of connections I had been hoping for and knew I had to rethink my teaching.

We were deeply entrenched in symbolism and metaphor while reading *Lord of the Flies* when the evening news gave me inspiration. In my classroom we had been discussing the themes of authority, power, and evil versus good, all themes that I saw recurring in the news. Sudden-

But beyond the basic premise that it was connecting them to the idea of a journey in *The Odyssey*, I did not see the students making the kind of connections I had been hoping for and knew I had to rethink my teaching.

ly I realized that the way to bring the literature to life for my students was to bring in tangible proof that the themes in the literary canon were evident in everyday life.

I started by bringing in an article for the students to read about the riots in the Middle East. We talked about why the people were rioting and I shared some of the history behind the event, but I decided to see if my students could make the connection to our text on their own. It didn't take long. A few minutes into our reading, a student interrupted me to loudly declare that "this is just like

the boys on the island in our book!" I smiled and asked her to explain her reasoning. Slowly over the next few minutes all of the students began to see the connections, and we even discussed other current events that related to themes of the novel. Suddenly, my classroom was alive with conversation about the book and our world.

A few weeks later, a student brought in an article about riots at a soccer game in Egypt where 79 people were killed. He told me he thought it went with themes we had been discussing in class. I was excited that my students were making connections on their own and were able to see how the literature was a tangible artifact that could pertain to our world today. I decided that instead of discussing the article in class, I would post it on our class website and discussion blog. I gave students the following assignment: *Respond to the article posted by Wednesday and to a classmate's comment by Friday*. Students groaned at having to do a new homework assignment, yet some were excited because it utilized technology. I wanted to see the kind of connections students could make to the literature and to each other beyond the classroom walls.

What I found on the blog was that many of my quiet students were no longer overpowered by the louder students in the classroom; they could say their piece without being interrupted. And what did I see on the blog? Students making amazing connections to our literature and to each other. For example, the following student's response to the article posted on the blog:

It was pretty surprising to see all of these people fighting and killing each other and the security guards were just standing there watching. Also, I can't believe that they let these people walk into the stadium with all those weapons. This shows that human nature can be a scary thing, because two sides didn't agree with one another they fought each other over it and made it worse. I think this relates to Lord of The Flies because there weren't any laws and look what happened, eventually they got fed up with each other and decided to solve the problem in a violent way because

there was no one there to keep the peace.

The student was able to clearly relate the events in *Lord of the Flies* to the events in Egypt. Students were relating back to previous books we had discussed and saw clear connections between the themes covered in class. While reading both *Night* and

Slowly over the next few minutes all of the students began to see the connections and we even discussed other current events that related to themes of the novel. Suddenly my classroom was alive with conversation about the book and our world.

Lord of the Flies, we had discussed the theme of "duality of man," the basic idea that all human beings have good and evil sides. The following students connected this theme to both fiction and the article in their responses:

This soccer riot in Egypt clearly displays the chaotic and erratic behavior of human beings. Every human being is born wild, until they are tamed and taught to be socially acceptable. This riot has only proven that humans have the ability to defame their own species as savage and careless. Likewise as in Night, the characters in the concentration camps displayed this other side to the human race, for example when they would kill others of their own kind for a small ration of bread. This riot, and all riots like these, is a disgrace to human nature. This is also being seen in Lord of the Flies as Jack is going back to his wild state because he knows he does not need to follow society's rules on the island. The duality of our kind is surprising, yet predictable, as we are all born untamed.

In response to the posting above, another student wrote:

I like how Brooke says, "the duality of our kind is surprising, yet predictable, as we are all born untamed." I think this is a great explanation of human nature. We are all born with no knowledge at all, just instincts. It is up to our parents to raise us the right way. Imagine if parents never "raised" their children. Think about what the human race would be like today. I can see us as being a savage species, no more educated or kind than the average cave man. Human nature is definitely naturally on the dark side, for there are too many events to prove otherwise.

Both of the girls who responded above were extremely shy in class and did not often exercise their voices; however, through the blog and the use of current events, I and their classmates had the opportunity to "hear" their voices. I knew that these girls were critical thinkers who could apply larger concepts depicted in the literature to our world today. Suddenly I saw how both the blog and my use of current events had helped students to make the connections I was seeking. I changed my pedagogical approach to the canon and my students were interested because literature was now alive for them.

I changed my pedagogical approach to the canon and my students were interested because literature was now alive for them.

I tried this approach again with our reading of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. I posted a story found in the *San Diego Reader* entitled "Breathing" by Enrique Cervantes, a local college student who lived in El Cajon, a community close to where my students lived, yet vastly different. It is written in narrative form from Enrique's point of view and tells the true story of a 17-year-old Muslim girl in love with a Chaldean boy (generally not acceptable in their cultures). According to the author, the Muslim girl's mom had caught the two of them together and reprimanded the girl, telling her she was

not allowed to see the boy again. A few moments later the girl jumped from her mother's moving car. The author emotionally describes the situation he witnessed, and it is clear that this girl had tried to kill herself because her parents were keeping her from the man she loved. During my initial reading, I was struck

However, I believe that by making students look at their own experiences and the experiences of those around them, they can clearly see the lives of the characters in the canonical literature come alive.

by the potential connection my students could make between this real life "tale of woe" and the tale of woe we were reading in class. I hoped my students would recognize the parallel experiences in these accounts of young love and tragedy. I also thought it was important that my students read about something that was happening to teenagers only 15 miles away.

From reading this complex and tragic story, I found that my students were able to connect to the larger world around them and to the literature. This is evidenced in the comments I received on the blog. One of my students' comments on the blog read:

Well, what I liked most about this story is that it showed insight into how other people besides me and my friends live. However, this made me feel somewhat uncomfortable in knowing that there is such hate going on so close. But, I also feel like this happens in a lot of places. It may not always be between the Chaldeans and Muslims, but racism and hate crimes happen almost everywhere, unfortunately. This story can relate to Romeo and Juliet in some ways. For one, the Chaldeans and Muslims represent the two big families in the play; they even have the same first letters! Also, the girl and the boy come from two very conflicting races with extremely bad pasts.

Another student wrote:

This story was eye opening in a way. I didn't know all this was happening just that close to us. As soon as something like this happens, though, it seems to stick with a person as a constant reminder of the way the world really works. This article relates to Romeo and Juliet by the Chaldeans and Muslims relating to the two big families Capulets and Montagues. Romeo and Juliet hold extreme pasts just as these two people did. Romeo and Juliet always would do anything for each other, and this story really portrays how love can take over, and you can become blinded by everything else.

Although I do not feel the freedom to choose the literature that my students read, as Christensen (2000) suggests teachers do in Reading, Writing, and Rising up, I can choose texts from the outside that connect to assigned reading.

Both students used essential critical thinking skills to synthesize new information and apply it to information they already had. The blog allows me to post interesting current issues that connect to my students and our literature and stimulates real and authentic conversations in a nonthreatening way that requires minimal class time.

Although I do not feel the freedom to choose the literature that my students read, as Christensen (2000) suggests teachers do in *Reading, Writing, and Rising up*, I can choose texts from the outside that connect to assigned reading. When choosing outside works, I follow Christensen's advice, "I select pieces that provoke us to think big thoughts, to argue about ideas that matter, to look at our lives and our choices, to help us understand why things are the way they are and to imagine how they could be different" (165). This is not an easy process; finding relevant articles that connect well

takes time and patience. However, I believe that by making students look at their own experiences and the experiences of those around them, they can clearly see the lives of the characters in the canonical literature come alive. Suddenly students want to read to make connections, to see themselves and others around the world in literature from over half a century ago. It becomes a sort of treasure hunt, with students beginning to discuss the connections they have found in last night's reading and compare them to the articles posted on the blog before class has even started. Students bring in articles they have found or that their parents have told them about and beg me to post them on the blog or discuss them in class. The literary canon is no longer just about "dead

The literary canon is no longer just about "dead white authors"; it has taken on new forms in my classroom as various cultures, religions, and genders have been discussed and connected to each of the books in exciting ways.

white authors;" it has taken on new forms in my classroom as various cultures, religions, and genders have been discussed and connected to each of the books in exciting ways.

Thus, what I have learned is that instead of being disconnected from the literature and only teaching it through a literary lens, we need to step outside of the box and help our students see that the themes present in past literature are themes that are present in the lives around them, and this can clearly be seen through current, real-world events. Yes, we have to read certain books sometimes, and yes, our students often do not enjoy the books they are forced to read; therefore, it is our job to make the books interesting, to motivate them, to change their mindset. I believe the best way to get a student to want to read is to connect litera-

ture to their own life or the lives of those around them. When students can see the themes from literature played out in the real world, they understand why they are being forced to read certain texts. It is no longer because the dictator-teacher tells them the book is respectable, it is because they can see that the book has merit, is worthy in today's society, and addresses universal themes seen throughout the world.

Therefore, teachers, if you want your students to be more engaged in their reading of the canon, if you want them to think deeper and make connections, bring in tangible examples

of the larger ideas these books discuss and you will have a classroom that no longer sees these books as static, but alive and relevant to their world today.

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MUSE BOX

**Stacey Goldblatt,
SDAWP 1999**

Where is your imagination right now? Is it present and commanding a slice of your day? Or, is it vacationing somewhere in the remote corners of Bora Bora? I recently spent time in several elementary school classrooms and posed this same question to kids. We decided it was time to summon our imagination and have it tell us the story of our lives.

I Was Born in a Treasure Chest

by Georgia, grade 3

I was born in a treasure chest

My name is Doxie

I live in Honolulu

My first word was supercalifragilisticexpialidocious

The first steps I took were on the Great Wall of China

For fun, I danced on a river of lava

I learned to read in a nautilus 2,000 leagues under the sea

I was related to the sun, moon and stars

My journey was to the end of the world

I travel by a flying carpet

I drink only dew from cherry petals

My fears are forever darkness

I hide in a tree house in the clouds

What's your life story according to your imagination? Knock on its door! Tear it down if you have to and ask. See what spills out and don't be afraid to get on the magic carpet and ride it where it wants to take you.

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Calendar of Events

Invitational Summer Institute (SI) 2013

Application deadline

January 14, 2013

SI Group Interview

Feb. 2, 2013

SI Orientation Days

April 20, 2013

Summer Institute

June 24 - July 19, 2013

UC San Diego

Save the Date SDAWP Spring Conference

March 2, 2013

UC San Diego

8:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.

Year-Round Open Institute 2013

Coming Soon!

Please check our website
for upcoming details.

24th Annual CSMP ELD Institute

Common Core: Challenges &
Opportunities for ELLs

Saturday, March 16, 2013

7:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m.

Handlery Hotel, Mission Valley

Digital Learning Day

February 6, 2013

For information
and resources visit

www.digitallearningday.org/

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