Language Arts Journal of Michigan

Volume 24
Issue 1 (Re)Vision

Article 4

1-1-2008

Finding the Center of Gravity: Unexpected Benefits of Non-graded Writing

Angela K. Knight Kosciuszko Middle School, Hamtramck, MI

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm

Recommended Citation

Knight, Angela K. (2008) "Finding the Center of Gravity: Unexpected Benefits of Non-graded Writing," Language Arts Journal of Michigan: Vol. 24: Iss. 1, Article 4.

Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1099

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Language Arts Journal of Michigan by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Finding the Center of Gravity: Unexpected Benefits of Non-graded Writing

Angela K. Knight

Kosciuszko Middle School Hamtramck, MI

"Is This for a Grade?"

One of the most common recurring themes in educators' complaints is the lack of time. There isn't nearly enough time to include all of the rich and varied educational experiences that we want our students to have. A plethora of demands from governmental and administrative sources have all but dictated how we spend each minute of our classroom time. Much of the affective development, e.g., activities to get to know students and foster community among them, has been eliminated with the added rigors of the curriculum. So, who has time to include classroom activities that don't count for a grade? Are non-graded activities, such as *free writing*, a waste of time?

The concept of free writing has been debated since the 1960s. In 1986, Fox and Suhor concluded their article, "Limitations of Free Writing," by saying that "it appears that the use of free writing alone in a composition classroom will not automatically produce better writers. However, there may be times when free writing can be used as a tool in developing students' skills as writers" (35).

Anyone who has spent any length of time in a classroom has certainly heard at least one student ask, "Is this for a grade?" The underlying tone of the question certainly implies that if the assignment isn't graded, the student won't bother to complete it. What about the non-graded classroom? If it is true that "truly powerful writing comes from being nurtured, not being tested" (Nelson 61), what would happen to students' writing over the course of an non-graded year? I found surprising results, particularly about

affective responses of students about their writing, when I spent a school year studying my sixth-grade homeroom students and their non-graded writing.

Is writing like riding a bike? Is it true that once taught, practice time is all that is needed to become a better bike-rider? Once students have found their center of gravity and learned how to sit on a bike without falling over, the better they will get and the more riding they will do? If the answer to these questions is yes, is there a magical center of gravity that students need to find balance in their writing? Once that mystical place has been discovered, do they just need time to practice writing so that they will, over time, improve?

Background and Context

Improving students' writing across the curriculum has been one of the three academic goals in my middle school. As Kenneth Lindblom says, "If the entire school—even the entire community—works together to provide genuinely stimulating and challenging environments for writing, each student writer will grow more" (106). The North Central Assocation (http://www.ncacasi.org/) writing-goal group for the school designated Tuesday and Thursday mornings in homeroom as writing time. Therefore, the group at our school leading this movement had agreed to create time for students to work on writing, although grades would not drive this addition to the curriculum. Homeroom is a non-graded course; therefore, the writing done during this time would be treated as practice and would be non-graded.

Students were provided with, but not required to use school-wide prompts, nor were they required to write in particular genres. The purpose was to provide consistent, predictable time during which students could write. The students were to bring in a notebook of their choice at the beginning of the year, and the notebooks would be stored in a milk crate in the classroom for the duration of the year. Teachers were asked to look through the notebooks weekly and provide positive feedback.

Because the NCA writing-goal group members at our school (I was the reading goal group chair)

found numerous research studies documenting the value of non-graded writing, the group decided that this would be a school-wide strategy: students would write regularly and predictably in an non-graded setting. In order to achieve this goal, a sub-committee of the writing goal group

I started to wonder more specifically: what is it that happens to students' writing if they are given time and choice and positive response in a nongraded setting?

compiled a list of prompts for twice-weekly school-wide use during the non-graded (homeroom) class time.

For my undergraduate teacher education courses in the early 1990s, the works of Calkins and Graves had been my textbooks. I had been taught how to teach language arts through the writing workshop method, which included time, choice, and positive response as integral components of quality writing instruction. I didn't question the validity of the writing strategy, but after years of believing in it, I started to wonder more specifically: what is it that happens to students' writing if they are given time and choice and positive response in a non-graded setting?

Objectives for the Year. By the end of the year, I wanted to see more sophistication and style in the students' writing. I expected to see elaboration and details, compound and complex sentences, interesting introductions and compelling conclusions. I hoped that students would use specific nouns and active verbs. I anticipated an increase in entry length and writing filled with voice. I dreamed of a classroom of students who loved to write and approached other writing assignments with the same positive attitude that they showed in homeroom during journal writing.

People do one of two things to make their dreams come true: they work, or they wait. During this time with the students and their notebooks, I was not supposed to work; I was not supposed to teach writing. It violated the spirit of the writing strategy to turn homeroom writing into another mini-English class. All teachers had homeroom classes; not all teachers were comfortable delivering writing instruction. It was hard to not share bits of writing

instruction during this time. I dreamed of great things for my group of writers, and the only thing I was supposed to do was to provide time, choice, and positive response. I had to wait and see what happened, and I decided to track the approach and the students' progress and turn this opportunity into a research study.

Classroom Profile

Homeroom class was first thing in the morning each day, the first twenty-five minutes of school. My homeroom class that participated in the study consisted of approximately thirty-five students throughout the course of the year with a maximum class size of twenty-five at any given point. Sixteen students (four males and twelve females, all between eleven and fourteen years old) elected to participate in this research study, which focused on the effects of non-graded writing during one academic year. Of the sixteen, ten of the students received either free or reduced lunch. Only three of the students spoke English as their first language. Table 1 lists their ethnicity and the primary language spoken in their homes.

Table 1

Ethnicity	Number	Home language
Middle Eastern	3	Arabic
Caucasian	4	Bosnian
African-American	3	English
Asian	6	Bengali = 5
		Urdu = 1

During the year of this study, I taught three sections of sixth grade language arts class and one section of a required sixth grade elective called reading/writing workshop. Table 2 shows the number of students who participated in this non-graded writing study who were also in other academic classes that I taught.

Table 2

Class	Number of participants
Homeroom	16
First Hour Language Arts	3
Second Hour Reading/Writing	4
Third Hour Language Arts	1
Fourth Hour Language Arts	

The language arts class is a required core class that follows the state curriculum. For all core classes at this time, teachers were required to follow the same set of lesson plans, using the district-adopted textbook, and use common assessments. Reading/writing workshop was a required elective class for sixth graders. It was taught using the same language arts curriculum but it was approached differently. Because it was an elective, each reading/writing workshop teacher created her own lesson plans for each section. My reading/writing workshop section consisted of writing workshop time that alternated with class novels and literature circle discussions.

Two of the participants were in one of my language arts classes and the second hour reading/writing class. Two of them were in a sheltered language arts class for students who spoke English as a second language. These data are included to show that not all of the homeroom students who participated in this study of non-graded writing were scheduled in either of my academic classes for writing instruction.

This study of non-graded writing took place over the course of an academic year. (I had already signed up to participate in a teacher research course.) When my homeroom students were enthusiastic about writing at the beginning of the year, I asked if they would like to help me do my homework for graduate school. I asked if they were willing to write one more day per week than was required of the rest of the school in order to complete the study. In democratic fashion, we took a vote, and the majority won. Students were given pre- and post-surveys, and several chose to participate in an exit interview towards the end of the school year.

The next section provides an example of what this non-graded writing time looked like in a homeroom class.

A Day in the Life of a Notebook

Five minutes before the bell: the first student arrives in the classroom and puts his books down at his assigned place and starts taking the chairs off the tables. A second student arrives and helps.

Three minutes before the bell: all the chairs are on the floor. The next students who arrive put their books at their places and go to the purple crate to grab a stack of notebooks and pass them out, leaving them in the appropriate places for their owners to find when they arrive.

One minute before the bell: on this particular day,

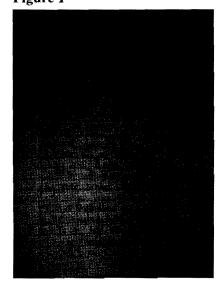
twelve students sit quietly with their notebooks on their desks when the bell rings. A pen or pencil lays neatly parallel to each of the notebooks. A few students hold whispered conversations. One by one, the students open their notebooks to put the day's date at the top of the page. The rest of the class, minus a straggler or two still running up the stairs or struggling with a combination lock, wait patiently for their notebooks to be delivered to their desks by the students who took the initiative to distribute them when they came into the room.

The bell rings: all notebooks are open. The rest of the class finishes writing the date. Part of my classroom routine for my academic classes, language arts and reading/writing workshop, includes this same procedure five days a week: notebooks are passed out at the beginning of the hour and, when the bell rings, the students should be responding to the instructions or writing prompt on the board or overhead.

Just after the bell rings on Tuesdays and Thursdays, I read aloud the school-wide prompt. One day, the school-wide question asks, "Would you eat a worm sandwich if you got to be on your favorite TV show or meet your favorite celebrity?" This makes the students laugh; they look around at their classmates laughing, and then the hands fly across the pages. I quickly take attendance and join the students in writing. Some days, I write with the students; sometimes I jot notes about their activities during the writing time.

The students usually write for seven-ten minutes, and then I asked if there are any volunteers to share. Here is Nadis's response to the worm sandwich question (Figure 1 shows the response in her notebook):

Figure 1



"I would eat a worm sandwich because I want to be famous and rich. Plus I could meet my role model Allen Iverson who is a basketball player on the Philadelphia 7sixers... So, If I had to eat a worm sandwich I would for t.v. Come on It can't taste that bad." (Fieldnote: Nadis drew an arrow connecting "famous" and "rich" and wrote the word "switch" between them. The words "Come on" were squished between the last two sentences.)

Analysis of the Sequence

By this time in the school year, we had not talked about revising and editing the journal entries, yet Nadis showed that he had reread his writing when he decided that "rich and famous" sounded better than "famous and rich." He also inserted the "come on" after he'd written the last sentence, adding more voice to his entry. Nadis shared aloud nearly every day, yet he rarely put his notebook in the crate. When I asked students in their survey about how often they put their notebooks in the crate for me to read and respond to, he said, "I think I put it in [the crate] five times because I usually read what I wrote so the teacher doesn't have to read it again." It was interesting that he considered the oral version of his writing equally as valuable to his written entry, when the oral entry is often heard as what the writer meant to say while the written version shows evidence of the original text as well as additions and deletions.

Students never asked if the writing was for a grade; they knew that homeroom was a non-graded class that only counted for attendance. So, why were they so motivated to write? What happened over the course of a year to this non-graded writing? What I found was far more important than simply an improvement in their writing skills.

When I returned to the list of things that I wanted to look for in their writing and started talking to them about writing, through one-on-one interviews and the fall surveys, I realized that my students did not yet have a working vocabulary to fully analyze their writing. One student knew some of the language, such as "prior knowledge," the need to "be specific" and "add details," but she didn't use them correctly. This gap illustrated my need to alter the focus of my research project: since I could not talk with the students about their writing in the way that I wanted

to, I could not focus on potential cognitive improvements in their writing. As a novice teacher-researcher, I worried that giving students the answers I wanted them to have would skew the study in which I was trying to see if they developed these skills and used these strategies on their own. I began to wonder, however, what else happened as a result of all of this non-graded writing time.

Writing for an Audience – But Who is the Audience?

The Teacher as Audience. "For most of us—and especially for most students—audience and expected response have a huge influence on the experience of writing" (Elbow 29). With this in mind, sharing time was incorporated at the end of most writing days. Students could volunteer to read their writing aloud at the end of each writing session on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays but were not required to share. I still felt a little awkward about not reading and responding to their writing, particularly since I was ultimately responsible for the content of the work produced in my classroom. I'm not complaining about the fact that I didn't have to grade it, and students certainly didn't seem to mind, but I did wonder what was going on in their heads and in their notebooks. On the fall survey, I asked if they wanted a place to share their writing with just me. So, I put a milk crate next to my desk with a sign on it that said, "Please read." Students had the option to turn in their notebook on any day that they wanted me to read their writing.

The first day for the "please read" crate was on a Friday. The students had previously created a collection of over a hundred index cards with different topics to use on Fridays. Four students left their notebooks for me to read. At the end of the day when I pulled the notebooks out of the crate, I had an anxious moment when I realized that I didn't know how I would respond. I usually use rubrics when grading writing, and here I was, faced with these pieces of writing. The authors had made a choice to let me read them; now it was up to me to honor and respect their writing and their choice to share with me.

I had learned from my participation in the National Writing Project that there are many ways to respond to writing, and that I really should have asked the students how they wanted me to respond to their writing. In my academic classes, my strategy is to "balance criticism with

encouragement" (Jago 57). In this case, however, I knew that addressing the writing and pointing out the errors and limitations of the writing was not within the spirit of the writing strategy. So, how should I respond? Should I "bless" the writing and only point out the good things, as NWP fellows do when asked to do so as participants on E-Anthology (cf. Barton et al.)? Should I press the writer and ask questions about the writing? In the end, I used what I knew about each of the students and tread carefully, adding happy faces whenever I could. These were my first four responses I chose. The initials indicate the salutation to the student since I started each note with their name.

- C Thanks for sharing your writing with me! Are
 you still embarrassed by your most embarrassing
 moment, or is it funny to you now? Do you think
 students like to write about their embarrassing
 moments or do you think others enjoy hearing
 about them? Keep writing! Ms. K.
- SS-Thanks for sharing your writing with me! I had
 no idea that you were so interested in clothes. Are
 you interested in pursuing a career in modeling?
 What would you do if you were asked to model
 jeans and tennis shoes? Ms. K.
- ST Thanks for sharing your writing with me! Did you want me to read your Halloween entry that you shared yesterday, or the questions that you started to list in your notebook? It would help me if you would put a star or an arrow or something next to the part that you want me to read. Thanks for sharing out loud so often. I really appreciate it! Happy writing! Ms. K.
- AA How old were you when you started fasting for Ramadan? What did you mean when you said, "I didn't get it?" Thanks for sharing your writing with me! Happy writing! Ms. K.

I didn't get any more notebooks for the rest of the week. I started to worry that I had scared the students, and that my responses were not the kind of feedback they had hoped for. I didn't get any more notebooks the next week, either. On a Tuesday in November, however, fourteen kids left their notebooks in the crate! I wondered if it was a coincidence that this was the prompt that day: Some adults have a lot of trouble enjoying

themselves. If you were asked to give them some advice about how to play and have more fun, what would you say?

Before I responded, I needed to know what they wanted from me as a respondent. In an article by Jane Townsend et al., I found a way to think about the kind of assessment that would be helpful. The kind of assessment that is useful to any learner--honest feedback from caring observers—becomes complicated when one considers the challenge of writing and writing instruction. Writing is a complex task, particularly for students who struggle to form a logical order out of their often-swirling thoughts (72). I also needed more information about why (or why not) students chose to submit their notebooks, so I asked them to complete another survey.

Students' Purposes for Writing and Submitting the Notebooks. On Wednesday, I asked them to write and tell me why they did or did not put their notebook in the crate, and if so, what kind of response did they want. I was very pleased to see that none of the students turned in their notebooks to give me pointers on how to have fun! Two students said that they turned in their notebook to help me with my research project. I'd told them that I was studying their writing, but I didn't get more specific than that. Only two students asked for positive responses. The seven students who asked for honest feedback impressed me: they wanted the compliments, but they also wanted to know where they needed improvement. Students never asked, "What would I get if this were for a grade?" Evaluation wasn't important to

As a non-evaluative reader of their writing, I found it was easier to take a stance similar to that of a coach for a recreational team, one who encourages without criticizing.

them, just occasional feedback on the entries of their choice, and yet they continued writing.

Interestingly, too, even this early in the school year, students had already determined their own purposes for their notebooks. While some considered them private and didn't want to share what they deemed "bad writing," Two students had decided that they would use their notebooks

as a vehicle through which they could communicate with me. On the day that I asked students to tell me why they left their notebooks for me to read, Kaberi said that she had written me a note with a question and wanted an answer. Some of Kaberi's entries ended with letters addressed to me. These letters occasionally asked questions about the content and quality of her writing but, more often than not, they were questions about things she was thinking about. For example, we had an extended exchange while she was considering, applying for, and then waiting for acceptance from the National Junior Honor Society. Developing this type of relationship with Kaberi helped me to see that I held a slightly different role with the homeroom students than the teacher-critic role I held in my academic classes. As a non-evaluative reader of their writing, I found it was easier to take a stance similar to that of a coach for a recreational team, one who encourages without criticizing.

The Courage to Read Aloud: The Class as Audience. Four students said that their favorite part about journal writing was the sharing aspect, hearing what others had to say. Sarah wrote on her spring survey that the best part about journal writing "is when we share. It's fun. You might get a laugh or two." During interviews, however, most students said that this was precisely the reason that they didn't share aloud—they were afraid of being laughed at. Some said they were shy and preferred to share only with their friends. Sharing was important to most of them, though, as many students traded their notebooks across the table to silently read each other's writing at various times throughout the year.

They didn't want or need feedback; they simply wanted another human being to acknowledge that they had written something, to share the writing in a safe environment. This particular group of students seemed to need acknowledgement more than evaluation. In contrast, several other students let me know that they appreciated that sharing their writing was voluntary, as they preferred to keep their writing private. These students never shared aloud or let me read their notebooks; they were perfectly comfortable with the self as the only audience. In all cases, however, the freedom of non-graded writing allowed them to choose what they would say and to whom they would say it.

Confidence

One of the most exciting outcomes from this research project is that students grew more confident about themselves as writers. They grew to like writing more and felt proud of themselves for their accomplishments. Many students started the year with positive attitudes towards writing; this was evident in September when students voted to add a third day of journal writing every week at the beginning of the year in order to participate in this study. However, the vote was not unanimous.

As Chelle wrote on the day that I asked why they did or did not put their notebook in the crate, "I didn't turn my in Because I'm a Horribe writing so that's why mines wasn't in the box." (Note: Students' words are reproduced as they were written on the surveys.) Her fall survey said that she feels "great" about journal writing in homeroom, "because I like to write about good topics," but that she wouldn't put her notebook in a crate for me to read because "I not that good a writing." Throughout the course of the year, she changed her mind. "I put my note book in their seven times. Because I want to." She no longer felt she was a horrible writer. In response to the question about whether or not she felt that journal writing in homeroom helped her become a better writer, and if so, how did it help, she said, "Yes, because my writing is interesting now. I never used to be so excited about my writing." She also felt that she had made improvements in writing in her other classes, "...because my writing makes sense [now]."

Haroluz said, "I learned I started using great words to improve my writing. I can write more in my paragraphs." He still wasn't using the word "elaboration," but yet he did notice this in his writing. I came to understand that knowing the lexicon of writing is simply one of the tools, and that knowledge of this language does make writing instruction easier, but the students' analysis of their working knowledge of the language of writing is rarely evaluated.

Nadis also talks about elaboration in his writing. "I saw that in the beginning of the year I was writing like 2 or 3 sentences but now I writing paragraphs. So, that was a huge change. I started to write better things like I was imagining creativity. That also changed. I really have become a better writer."

Non-graded writing, to this group of students,

meant that there was less pressure to perform, not necessarily less effort to expand.

In one case, developing confidence was not limited to writing. During the course of the year, Sarah developed the confidence to share her opinions in her other classes and at home. "I think it really helped me become a better writer, and it helped me in my other classes, too. In art, I didn't really speak up and didn't participate in class. Now, I'm like the first one to." I asked her to talk more about this. She explained, "At first I didn't want to say anything. I thought I might make a mistake. And in homeroom, it helped. It told me that you're always right. Nothing's wrong." So I asked if she was going to start sharing more of her writing in homeroom. She said no, because she might get embarrassed, but now she speaks up more at home. "When my mother asks what we think about it, I'm the first one to talk about it. My brothers always look at me weird." It is my understanding that brothers will do this, but it hasn't stopped her from speaking her mind. She never shared her writing aloud in homeroom, but she did often share her poems in reading/writing workshop class. This is an amazing phenomenon of which I would have been completely unaware had I studied simply the growth in her writing development. I'm glad I asked these questions.

Frustrations

When I asked students about their writing in one-on-one interviews, concerns about handwriting and spelling were two recurring themes, supported by their responses to the fall and spring survey questions. This particular group of students did not have a vocabulary with which to analyze their writing. While I was discussing writing, the content of the words on paper, the manner of organization, the voice and style, the students were talking about their handwriting, their penmanship. When I asked the students what they noticed about their writing, they commented on whether they thought their writing was neat or sloppy. When I asked if they had tried anything new in their writing, Susan told me that she was still experimenting with forming letters in different ways.

I noticed this concern early on in the research process, but I did not want to skew my research by teaching the students the vocabulary with which to discuss

and analyze the different aspects of their writing. Did we discuss style and voice in language arts? Yes. Did we discuss organization, topic and concluding sentences? Yes. Were any of them able to discuss the interest or creativity in their writing? Not appreciably. Did I deny them the opportunity to learn the lexicon of writing, and do I feel guilty for this? Yes and yes. As a teacher, I feel as if I let valuable teachable moments pass by when I didn't use students' writing as opportunities to talk about all the rich bits of writing, such as style and voice, that are underemphasized in writing classes more concerned with form and correctness. However, was it the lack of this instruction that led my students to feel more comfortable and more confident in their writing? I may never know.

Another frustration was the prevalence of journal writing format in other language arts classes. The students became so comfortable with the genre of journal writing that much of their other writing sounded like journal writing as well. During different assignments for my language arts classes and reading/writing workshop class, students were asked to write as if they were a character. Many students began their entries, "If I were the main character..."

Although I tried to encourage students to write in other genres in their notebooks, I do not think I was explicit or repetitive enough. To encourage genre exploration, one morning I asked each student to try to rewrite the day's entry as if it were a conversation. Unfortunately, that one conversation was often the only instance of genre use other than journal writing. I also modeled a response to the journal question in which I responded to the journal question as if I were a fictional character. This, too, generated no response. The students were unable or unwilling to explore other genres.

Was it because they were training themselves to follow directions so carefully that they didn't feel comfortable venturing away from the implied instruction to use a first-person format when responding to the questions? Was it a lack of knowledge about genre or lack of interest in writing in other genres? I didn't explore that question fully with my students, but I will make a more conscientious effort to help my students differentiate between times when absolute adherence to the directions is necessary and times when they are allowed to take creative liberties.

Yong Zhao, Michigan State University professor, wrote, "The current or proposed reform initiatives—centralized curriculum, standardized testing, accountability, required course of study—could kill creativity, the United States' real competitive edge," (29). Linda Rief agrees: "Good writing comes from creativity, imagination, and passionate beliefs, feelings, opinions, questions. Good writing comes from caring enough to craft it to the best of one's ability. If we don't give kids ways to connect to that writing, and time to craft their thinking, we will get what we ask for: mediocrity" (53).

If my students always follow the directions or, indeed, always have directions to follow, I fear they will become part of that mediocre majority. Students need to be given opportunities to practice making creative leaps in their thoughts and in their writing, and they need encouragement to do so and to know when they will not be penalized for deviating from the assignment.

Implications

Middle school students are still discovering who they are and their place in the world. They need time and opportunities to evolve their opinions. Wanket, a high school English teacher in California, said,

Journal writing connects students with their emotional selves and core values. Through writing, students become aware of the relevance of their belief systems. Through writing, they begin a healthy habit of reflecting on moral values as they consider problems and issues that come up in their daily lives. (74)

My students agree. One student said that the best part of journal writing was "thinking about stuff I have never even thought about. When I hear some [of] these question that I have never thought makes me think." Another said, "[I]t (writing) tells me more things that I didn't know."

As a result of this research project, I will continue to provide opportunities for students to express themselves without the pressure to perform for a grade. I will encourage them more as a coach does because, as Townsend says, "Teachers can help if they act like coaches, not judges" (72). I will continue to build time into the schedule to allow for

small group as well as whole-class sharing time. I will also incorporate choice in my academic assignments: the choice to turn in an assignment for feedback and/or evaluation; the choice to complete several assignments and then choose the best one to turn in for evaluation. I feel that the students were empowered by the choices available to them during the journal writing time; it would be a powerful thing to incorporate these valuable options into an academic setting, which could be done at all grade levels.

Allowing students more practice before the performance, more coaching and fewer judgments might make education look a little more like an athletic team. What might then happen if students were given the opportunity to choose their best work to put on display, much like an athlete chooses their best events in which to participate? What if education took more of a team approach, like a charity bike ride in which each participant can cross the finish line in his or her own time in his or her best style and still be considered a champion?

Conclusion

Magical, mystical events happen in the classroom everyday. These invisible happenings cannot be tested, measured, or assessed, but they are potentially much more important than those things that can be quantified. The homeroom students were excited to get out their notebooks three days a week; the students in language arts classes seemed to struggle to remember to do this every day. Were the homeroom students looking forward to creating their own texts while the language arts students dreaded the day's writing, fearing the grade they might earn? Wonderful things happened during journal writing in homeroom, some of them because of, but not directly related to, the skill of writing, such as Sarah's newfound confidence in herself and her courage to share her opinions. If Sarah remembers nothing else from our journal writing experience, I hope that she will carry that confidence throughout her life.

Standardized tests cannot address such affective issues. As educators, we must keep our focus on the people in front of us. What happens in class—some positive, some negative—has little to do with the academic content that we are paid to teach. But at the beginning of each day, we are charged with teaching people as best we can. I will continue

to teach my students the material that the state curriculum and state tests deem "important," but I will also take the time to venture into other non-graded avenues of academic pursuit, knowing that what happens, while it may not be academically measurable, will be beneficial nonetheless. I will also make sure to invest the time necessary to teach students the lexicon that writers use when discussing their craft. This would help to enrich our conversations about their writing as well as to help them create more positive images of themselves as writers.

It is imperative to maintain balance while bike riding; it is necessary to maintain a similar sense of balance in the classroom as well. Good things come from classroom activities designed to help the whole person. As with most activities in life, we need balance: work and play, vegetables and chocolate, graded and non-graded assignments. It is important to know how to ride a bike, but it is more important to enjoy the ride.

Works Cited

- Barton, Larry, Peter Booth, Shirley Brown, Cathie English, Frankie Mengeling. "E-Anthology Growing as an Online Writing and Response Forum." *The Voice*, v. 10.1 (2005): http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/2165>. Retrieved August 25, 2008.
- Elbow, Peter. Everyone Can Write: Essays Toward a

 Hopeful Theory of Writing and Teaching Writing.

 New York: Oxford University, 2000.
- Fox, Deborah, and Suhor, Charles. "Limitations of Freewriting." *English Journal* 75.8 (1986): 34-36.
- Jago, Carol. "Responding to Student Writing: Keep Pedaling!" Voices from the Middle 9.1 (2001): 56-58.
- Nelson, G. Lynn. "Writing Beyond Testing: 'The Word as an Instrument of Creation'." *English Journal* 91.1 (2001): 57-61.
- Rief, Linda. "Writing—That's the Real Test." *Voices from the Middle* 13.2 (2005): 52-53.
- Townsend, Jane S., et al. "Writing Assessment: Multiple Perspectives, Multiple Purposes." *Preventing School Failure* 41.2 (1997): 71-76.

- Wanket, Maureen O'Leary. "Building the Habit of Writing." *Educational Leadership* 63.1 (2005): 74-76.
- Zhao, Yong. "Are We Fixing the Wrong Things?" Educational Leadership 63.8 (2006):28-31.

Sources for many of these writing prompts included the following:

- Cavert, Chris. What Would It Be Like...: 1001 Questions for Anytime Answers. Oklahoma City: Wood & Barnes, 2000.
- Eckert, Larry. If Anybody Asks Me...: 1001 Questions for Educators, Counselors, and Therapists. Oklahoma City: Wood & Barnes, 1998.
- McFarlane, Evelyn, and James Saywell. If... (Questions for the Game of Life). New York: Villard, 1995. Stock, Gregory. The Kids' Book of Questions. New York: Workman, 1988.

About the Author

Angela K. Knight (angela.k.knight@gmail.com) has been teaching language arts or English to sixth through ninth graders for fifteen years. She participated in the Harris County (TX) Department of Education Writing Project in 1993 and HCDE Reading Project in 1994. She has been involved with the Eastern Michigan Writing Project since 2005 and participated in the Oakland Writing Project Advanced Institute in 2006. This article is the result of her participation in the EMWP Teacher Research group in 2006. She lives in metro-Detroit with her husband and foster cat.