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Writing Journalistically to Learn In Any Classroom

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I am a true-blue teacher, yet I readily admit it: the four-hour school board meeting is an inadequate way to de-stress after a vigorous day of teaching fourteen year olds. But it does not mean that I ditch them. It is my responsibility to go. (Yes teachers, nod your head. *Umm-hmm. That's right.*)

But I hardly expect my students to attend. You would have shared my surprise in realizing that a senior student had beaten me to a meeting. What was *she* doing here?

She could have chosen to go on a date, get her nails done, go shopping. She had already gone to basketball practice and rehearsed her forensics piece. As she was an honors student, I assumed that homework was waiting to come aglow on her computer screen at home.

Alice*(a pseudonym), my student editor, had come to the meeting with a purpose: to interview the school board about its support of the high school administration's decision to not renew the contract of a nationally-ranked and well-loved coach.

And she had come to the meeting more than prepared: she had interviewed parents of the players, the athletes, administrators, teachers, and the coach. She had also been keeping up with the minutes of previous board meetings and local newspaper and television coverage.

With all of this data, Alice crafted and polished a front-page, above-the-fold news article. From then on, she was the expert, the go-to person for facts and clarification about the controversial issue. Her readers would ask me questions about the coach's contract and I would refer them to her. I had not written about it—she had.

Alice learned about a community issue not because she had read a chapter in a textbook

about it, or listened to a lecture about it (though she might get something out of those methods). She had written journalistically.

When students write journalistically, they use higher-order thinking to learn as they demand accuracy, pinpoint relevancy, consider audience, and synthesize information. When teachers trade formulaic writing and worksheets for journalism, their students have opportunities to personalize meaning. Donald Murray writes in *Expecting the Unexpected*, "News writers are active observers who ask questions, constantly seeking specific, accurate information. They are also continual learners, because it is the news writer's responsibility to connect the pieces of information, erecting a meaning for the reader from the raw materials of significant detail" (156). When appropriate, writing journalistically to learn can become even more exciting for students when they have chances to publish their articles for audiences they respect.

Regardless of publication, it is the process of journalistic writing, not the product, that is the most worthwhile.

Forms of interviewing and role playing can make writing journalistically fun and unpredictable. I have asked my students to read what I labeled a press release, (a passage from a text), in preparation for a press conference they would attend to ask questions of a famous historical person (whom I would play in costume). Using their notes from the press release and the press conference, they would then write articles on their own to be read aloud to the class afterward. Depending on the historical character, one can imagine the humorous questions and snappy retorts can pop up.

Daniels and Bizar write that it is best practice when students go beyond the surface of a

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text and ask questions, make inferences, evaluate and recall. When the students collaborate to discuss the text with a goal in mind, they are also meeting best practices. Most high school students who have participated in press conferences and then written articles have been eager and proud to share their writing. And I have to admit that I have a pretty good time too. William Zinsser, author of *Writing to Learn*, writes, “Probably no subject is too hard if people take the trouble to think and write and read clearly . . . It’s by writing about a subject we’re trying to learn that we reason our way to what it means” (22). The press release/press conference idea may draw English-minded students into math and science classes, and the students who live for science and math but despise writing may find that they can write about subjects they care about.

Writing Journalistically to Learn Across Disciplines

Language Arts

- After watching the movie of the novel, ask student to write editorials that compare it to the novel.
- Become a character and have students interview you via press conference. Afterward, they write articles using their notes.
- Ask students to write news briefs following each chapter in a novel, the best which will be printed in the class newspaper set in the corresponding time period.
- Have students consider their book’s cover. As a prediction, they write two journalistic paragraphs for it as a caption.
- Using their class notes from the week, they write a news articles highlighting what they’ve learned which are sent to pen pals at the elementary school.

Social Studies

- Ask students to pick a need or problem in the community (such as poverty, homeless children, or bullying), and write investigative

articles to be printed in the school newspaper.

- Write a list of questions for an interview with one of the civil rights activists read about in chapter X. Students role play the interviews with each other and write the stories.

Math

- Students interview their classmates about how they will apply this week’s topic in real life. They write articles using their notes.
- Using equations they’ve learned this semester, they figure the budget for the average college freshman who works X hours a week at Y dollars an hour. They write articles explaining to college freshmen how to set up a budget, which are given to seniors before they graduate.

Physical Education

- Once students understand the concepts of a game, ask them to go to a sports contest and write a sports article reporting the results.
- Challenge them to write sports how-to articles to be printed in a teen sports magazine.

Science

- Encourage students to write news broadcast script to be presented to the class about the results of the week’s lab.
- Using their observations of the labs this week, have them write news articles to be placed in the class anthology.

While some teachers may think nothing about assigning articles, other may feel unprepared. Teachers don’t have to be Barbara Walters look-a-likes or student newspaper advisers to assign journalistic writing. The learning occurs in process, and unless the articles are being published, emphasis should not be placed on perfection of the final article.

As Americans cannot help but be consumers of media, all educators have prior knowledge of the

basic journalistic form. A list of introductory requirements is sometimes all that is needed to jog the memory. All an instructor needs to know to use journalistic writing to learn in the classroom is:

- News writing places the most pertinent information in the first paragraphs of the article. In typical inverted pyramid fashion, the importance of information decreases as the story continues.
- News writing is specific, accurate, and delivers concrete, factual information.
- News writing displays information clearly. Sentences are short and paragraphs contain one element of information; paragraphs are rarely more than three sentences long.
- News writing uses direct sentences, most often subject-verb-object sentences.
- News writing does not include the writer's opinion.
- News writing focuses on one dominant meaning. The reader should be able to answer the question, "What's the single, most important element in the story?" (Murray 165).
- News writing uses direct, attributed quotes.

A simple lesson to teach the basic components of an article would be the comparison of the genre to another. Couple that with an analytical viewing of a television news broadcast, or a close reading of newspaper and magazine articles and students will have affirmed what they most likely have already observed about how journalism works.

While Alice is not bound to become a journalist, she is using her well-conditioned higher-level thinking skills as she pursues a law degree. She told me that journalism has helped her in many ways. I have to believe that as I write this she is still working hard, her computer screen always aglow.

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