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My First Look at Publishing: A New Adventure in Literacy Leadership

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“She makes sure the soil is right – light and well-drained, with plenty of room for sprouting. Then Mrs. Spitzer plants the seeds.”

Mrs. Spitzer’s Garden, Edith Pattou

At the beginning of each school year, I always read the delightful children’s book *Mrs. Spitzer’s Garden*. Its metaphor of a growing garden and growing children lovingly tended is truthful and thoughtful. My eighth graders roll their eyes when they see this sweet book, but I know they love it.

One project that I have developed and revised for eighth graders is an Autobiographical Scrapbook that involves both language and art. It is also an opportunity for all of us to “tend the garden.” Simultaneously, they read an autobiography or biography of a person who has made a positive contribution to society.

I say revised because I have changed the writing topics to meet English Language Arts Standards and have received further suggestions from a wonderful colleague, DeLynn Cox who teaches language arts at Pinewood Middle School.

In viewing this project as best practice one criterion could be the test of time. Consider the letter (I still have the original) that I received from a former student in November 2001:

Dear Mrs. Baker,

About eleven years ago, you assigned the 8th grade (maybe it was 7th grade) students in your class to create an autobiography scrapbook. I still have that book, complete with the prediction of my

future. Apparently, I knew a lot about my self back then.

At age 24 I’m living in a one-story town home in Peoria, Illinois after I turned down a job in North Carolina. My boyfriend’s house is about as near as can be - he lives next door. I graduated from Michigan State in 1999 with a brand new car and currently have a comfortable checkbook allowance.

I majored in journalism and work at a daily newspaper as a copy editor and page designer. I turned down a trip to Europe, but I did finally make it to Walt Disney World for spring break my senior year.

Unfortunately, I have been ill with Chronic Fatigue Immune Deficiency Syndrome. I was extremely ill my senior year of high school, but since then I’ve been doing better, at least most of the time.

I still fondly recall my days in ALPS, OM and even the Zero Hour Foreign Language class that was so hard to get up for.

My parents still live in Kentwood, as do two of my sisters, one you may remember, Kristine. She’s currently a teacher for ESL students.

Just wanted to drop a note to let you know what a former student was doing – oh so many years later.

Before I introduce this project, I read this letter to the students. They are always amazed that she still has her autobiography. Next, as a prewriting and illustrating exercise, I ask my eighth grade writers to do the following:

Imagine your life as a roller coaster. What are some of the high points? What are some of the low points? Now draw and label this roller coaster including the high points and low points or draw and name a magnificent mountain range. Include its peaks and valleys and the peaks and valleys of your own life.

Students only need to write the events that they are comfortable sharing. I make this very clear from the beginning and observe closely any students that may be showing signs of anxiety or discomfort. The next phase of the project is the explanation and instructions. Each written or design/art requirement is assigned between 10 and 30 points.

Autobiographical Scrapbook

Design a cover, print a dedication page, and write a preface. Illustrate with good use of color, graphics, borders, word art or photographs.

Pictures/Family Tree. Pictures of your family, significant relatives, pets and friends. Label each picture.

Important/influential Person. 1-2 page essay that describes a person who has influenced you. Include a description of appearance and a specific memory that you have of the person. Explain how he/she has influenced you. Title needed. OR

Interview this influential/important person. Choose 25 questions from the interview selection. Mrs. Baker will provide a copy of the questions. Write/type the answers in full sentences.

Interview a classmate. Choose 25 questions, and write/type the answers in full sentences. Mrs. Baker will provide the questions.

Values. Five pictures of things, people, places, and ideals you value and a paragraph describing each. Paragraphs should be six or more sentences. No second person. Use photos, drawings, magazine clippings, clip art, or Internet images.

Hobbies/spare time activities. Include 5 pictures of hobbies/ activities. Label each picture. Use photos, magazines, clip art, or Internet images.

Facing a Challenge. Write a 1-2 page essay on a time when you or someone you know has faced a challenge. How did you face this challenge? The results? Overcome? Or are you still facing this challenge? Title needed.

News Events. Ten pictures, articles, or headlines from newspapers or newsmagazines focusing on major world events that have happened during your lifetime.

Quotations. Ten thoughts or quotes that inspire or are relevant to you. Be sure to include who said each quote. Ten Things I've Learned about Life. 10 truths that you've learned about life so far.

Ten Things I'll never understand about Life. 10 thoughts or ideas that you'll never understand.

Flashbulb Memory. Write a 1-2 page narrative of an incident in your life that made a strong impression. Include a creative lead, strong ideas, dialogue, and vivid detail. Title needed.

Blueprint Memory. Write a 1-2 page narrative of memories surrounding a location. Include a creative lead, vivid detail, and dialogue. Title needed. Include a detailed drawing of the location. Graph paper may be used.

Being a teen in 2005. Write a five-paragraph essay explaining what it is like to be a teen in 2005. Include an intro with a thesis statement, 3 points in the body, and a concluding paragraph. Title needed.

Dream Poem or Essay. Write a poem or essay about your dreams for the future. Poem may be rhyming or free verse and no less than 16 lines. Title needed. Or a poem entitled "Who Am I Now?" Describe yourself as of today. Try to focus on your character, current goals, qualities, values, or spirituality. Rhyming or free verse. 16 lines. Creative title.

Gifts. Write a paragraph essay, approximately 8-12 sentences, about the greatest gift that you have ever received. From whom? How did it change you?

Next year, before I introduce the scrapbook, I will have as a guide *Write Source: A Book for Writing, Thinking and Learning* (2005). Under the section, "Forms of Writing" is a complete lesson on narrative writing. On page 98, before students compose, the text asks the student to "Understand Your Goal" and utilizing the Six Traits philosophy outlines the traits of narrative writing:

Ideas – Select an important time in your life. Include events and details that show how you have changed.

Organization – Present the events in chronological order with a strong beginning, middle, and ending. Consider using dialogue.

Voice – Use an active voice and match the tone to your experience.

Word Choice- Choose specific words with appropriate feelings or connotations.

Sentence Fluency – Make your sentences flow smoothly by combining and expanding them.

Conventions – Be sure that your punctuation, capitalization spelling and grammar are correct.

There is also a “Rubric for Narrative Writing” which once again uses Six Traits. With true teacher optimism, I shall share only the description of the highest score on the rubric:

Ideas – The narrative captures an unforgettable time. The details make the story come alive.

Organization – The way the narrative is put together makes it enjoyable to read.

Voice – The voice in the narrative perfectly captures the experience.

Word Choice – The writer’s exceptional word choice captures the experience.

Sentence Fluency – The style of the sentences captures this time or experience.

Conventions – The narrative is error free.

Obviously, the autobiography scrapbook is an extensive project. I introduce it the first week in December, so that students may request any materials as gifts for the holidays, and I definitely keep in mind and assist any students who may not be able to afford or have access to supplies for the scrapbook. We conclude the project in May and share the results in formal presentations. They simply love looking at these scrapbooks, and the sixth and seventh graders look forward to this project as well.

Previously, I stated that the eighth graders also read a biography or autobiography. Next I will share the guidelines for this book presentation. Each card is given a number of from 5 to 10 points.

Book Report: Biography or Autobiography

Select an autobiography or biography totaling at least 100 pages.

Mrs. Baker must approve selection.

Read your book and then prepare a set of 4x6 note cards.

Number the cards in order 1-12 and complete the cards for your oral presentation:

1. On the first note card, include the following information: your name, title of the book underlined, copyright date, name of publisher, number of pages, and place where you obtained the book.
2. The person who is the subject of my book is...
3. The reason for choosing this book is...
4. The most important part of this person’s life was...
5. Other interesting facts about this person or his family...
6. The main character traits of this person are...
7. A significant problem or conflict that this person had was and the way in which he/she responded...resolution?
8. Other people who influenced this person and explain how...
9. I would/would not like to have this person as a good friend because...
10. Some valuable lessons that readers can learn from this person are...
11. My presentation aid, which helps tell more about the person is...poster, video clip, picture collage, song, poem, model, costume, interview, skit/drama. Be creative
11. Your choice...
Present the report. Speak loudly and clearly. Do not use like or um. No gum. Make eye contact with the audience. Use proper posture, smile, and show genuine interest in the presentation.

Turn in your note cards after the presentation.

“But the plants will keep growing, uncurling their stems, stretching their leaves outward, and showing their faces to the sun” (Pattou, 2001).

From years of research we know that reading and writing develop naturally together. I hope the projects that I have presented support and will continue to support this literary endeavor. If I can successfully help my students to set a purpose for

their writing, activate prior knowledge, construct meaning, and think critically about reading and writing, their own lives, and the lives of others, perhaps I will have made a difference for the “flowers in my garden”. The projects presented here and the reading and writing of my students thoughtfully remind me of the wise words of the delightful Mrs. Spitzer:

*Some of the plants grow quickly, pushing upward, eager, impatient.
Some grow more slowly, unfolding themselves bit by bit.
Some plants sprout thin and tall.
Some are bushy and wide-spreading.
Some are bold, showy. They are brightly colored, saying, “Look at me!”
Some are silvery and quiet, the color of the earth.*

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About the Author:

Lynn Baker has been teaching seventh and eighth grade language art at Crestwood Middle School in Kentwood, Michigan for over thirty years. She “truly loves watching middle school students grow in their reading and writing skills.”