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## Writing to Change the World: Creating Critical and Relevant Texts in Secondary English Classrooms

Ernest Morrell  
*Michigan State University*

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**WRITING TO CHANGE THE  
WORLD: CREATING CRITICAL  
AND RELEVANT TEXTS IN  
SECONDARY ENGLISH  
CLASSROOMS**

**ERNEST MORRELL  
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY**

I've done it. We've all done it. We have all assigned our students to create texts that do not matter to anyone or anything beyond the boundaries of the classroom. And, yet, if we are good at what we do, most of the students will comply. That is they will write as we have assigned; some well, some poorly, most somewhere in between.

Now, how often do we, as literacy educators, have the fortune of designing activities and assignments that encourage students to transcend themselves? How often do we engender texts that will leave an indelible mark on the fabric of society? Texts that matter to the future of the planet, to the cause of social justice. How often do we enable students to, through their textual production, play a role as architects of a more just and humane society? How often do our students' written words take flight out of classroom windows and into city streets, sweatshops, depleted rainforests, and skeletal industrial landscapes? Do we show them the power of their language to reconfigure the world in classrooms where everyone writes and writes, and everyone's paper is transcendental? And their words, our students' words, bring us to tears, to our knees, and then right out of the windows after them and into those same streets where life is happening. Don't think that it's possible with your kids? Let me tell you a story.

For the past four years, I have co-directed a summer research seminar for high school students throughout the Greater Los Angeles area. Held at a nearby university, the five-week seminar invites

these students to engage in critical research projects related to issues of importance to America's youth. Over the course of the project, students have investigated: school safety, the media's portrayal of teens, hip-hop culture, community language practices, standardized tests, and the declining minimum wage to name a few.

During the first two weeks of the seminar, students meet at the university to learn the tools of research and acquire background knowledge related to their topics of study. There is a great deal of reading during this period with works from the humanities, sociology, the law, critical theory, cultural studies, and educational research. The students also write everyday in the form of journals that encourage them to reflect on their experiences as youth and their growth and development as critical researchers. These journal responses will form the core of individual texts that students will continue to refine and develop throughout the duration of the seminar.

The students also form their five-member research teams and begin to develop their critical research projects by articulating a research question, reading relevant literature, and designing a method of study, including the creation of research instruments. Every sub-group is mentored by a practicing teacher from the area that assists with the student-centered process. Writing during these first two weeks consists primarily of reading notes, discussion notes, research questions, and questions for interviews and surveys.

The third and fourth weeks are mostly devoted to data collection and analysis. Students have gone to schools, neighborhood centers, shopping malls, newspaper offices, law offices, and even the Democratic National Convention! At these locales, students conducted individual and focus group interviews, distributed surveys, inspected facilities, captured video footage, collected artifacts, and recorded observational notes. Research teams normally also spend a few days back at the university debriefing, sifting through data, making slight changes to their instruments, and planning to go back into the field. Writing at this phase consists

of: interview transcriptions, field notes, and analytical research memos. Most groups also begin writing the introductory sections of their reports.

The final week and a half are what we call crunch time. Research groups need to perform their data analyses and write final reports that will be published on a major web site and distributed throughout the university and the surrounding communities of the city. They also begin to write their final presentations, which will be delivered to an audience of university faculty, parents, teachers, elected officials, and other community members. Finally, the students spend their final few sessions putting the finishing touches on their individual writing projects which will be similarly published and distributed.

And talk about writing to change the world! The student-created projects over the years have been nothing short of amazing. I call these products *critical texts*, because they are created by students who, because of age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, are frequently marginalized and disempowered in the greater society. Further, these texts have a potentially transformational aspect; that is, they are political texts that can play a role in fashioning a new and better world. The process of creating these pieces is referred to as *critical textual production* or CTP.

The critical textual production has led to state legislation, community activism, and major policy changes at the school and district levels. Student work has been featured in newspapers, on websites, and in policy documents. The students have presented their work at regional and national conferences as well as to teacher and student groups on high school campuses across the city. Several research groups have lectured and presented their reports to graduate students and teacher education courses at universities throughout the state.

Perhaps the greatest outcome of the critical textual production is the impact that the process has on the students. I have witnessed remarkable transformations in how students identify themselves as writers, researchers, intellectuals, and activists. From their experiences in the seminar, students have

gone on to join newspaper staffs, write editorials, intern with legal advocacy groups and start their own community-based organizations. There is even a group of alumni who have returned to work with successive cohorts as mentors and guides.

I want to make it clear that the program has been committed all along to serving students of all academic backgrounds and still has enjoyed unilateral success. The major tenets are that the work products are built upon students' funds of knowledge gained from their lives outside of school (Moll: 258), that the products are relevant to the lives of students as multicultural beings (Ladson-Billings: 17), and that the products are relevant to the cause of critical research for social justice (Kincheloe and McLaren: 264). Also, the program ensures that students are afforded the opportunity to learn as they participate in research communities of practice (Lave and Wenger: 29) where they are apprenticed to experts and mentored by more expert peers (Vygotsky: 87). We completely eschew and theory of learning that views students and empty vessels and advocates a one-way transmission of knowledge via lecture or recitation (Cazden: 30). These fundamentally affirming conceptions, coupled with ample spaces for activity and inquiry have proven a recipe for success in helping students to produce relevant and highly academic texts that are of service to society and self empowering at the same time.

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