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Inquiring Minds Want to Write: Tabloid Magazines in Writing Class

Tom Watson

One of my worst fears as a writer and teacher of writing occurred in the express checkout line at the grocery store. I didn't get caught with thirteen items instead of ten, hoping that the four-for-a-dollar cans of cat food would count as one item. Worse, one of my students saw me leafing through *The Weekly World News*, one of the several sensational tabloid magazines always on exhibit in the wire racks next to the *TV Guide* and *Family Circle*.

My student naturally said something cute, and I quickly returned the tabloid to its display, searching desperately for something teacher-like to say. Before I could mumble a defense like I was just looking up my horoscope, my student said that she read the tabloids all the time, that she thought they were interesting, even though none of the stories were true. She said that she liked the way the stories had clear details, strong characters, and always came to an exciting finish. She said she wished she could "write stuff like that": This from a fifteen year old girl who wouldn't read or write anything in my class of at-risk students. I paid for my groceries and told my student I'd see her in class the next day, puzzling over what she had said to me.

That night I thought about the difficulties my at-risk students had with reading and writing. Of course, they preferred the excitement and accessibility of music videos and movies to reading and writing. But beyond their desire for immediate visual gratification was their fear of the written

word. They believed that reading was a mandatory, unpleasant experience, a frustrating struggle with what to them was the indecipherable text of some old, dusty novel written by some dead guy a hundred years ago. Naturally, then, my students also thought that writing about something they were supposed to read was torture. How could I demonstrate to them that reading and writing can be pleasurable, even fun, activities? Lecturing about the meter of rap music or its metaphorical magic would induce sleep in my classroom. Could I use tabloids as an example of current American fiction and convince my students to try their hand at writing their own outrageous stories? I decided to find out. I went back to the store and bought all the copies in stock. At the very least, I would have a good excuse for being caught perusing such lowbrow literature as a tabloid magazine.

"Could I use tabloids as an example of current American fiction and convince my students to try their hand at writing their own outrageous stories? I decided to find out."

In class I handed out copies of *The National Inquirer*, *The Star*, *The Globe* and, my favorite, *The*

Weekly World News. We read the magazines, chuckling at the stories about alien babies and Elvis sightings. We discussed what literature is and what it is not. The students responded that only boring old books contained literature. I maintained that the tabloids were also literature, a kind of outlandish fiction. We talked for a while until we were comfortable with our own working definition of literature: it is text which the reader finds interesting and likes to read, but it is not the list of ingredients on a soup can label. We decided that writing is an attempt to transfer spoken language onto paper to explore some meaning about one's world. Finally, I suggested that we create our own tabloid magazine and they agreed.

I asked them to observe their surroundings for a few days with a comic, perhaps mischievous eye. I asked them to take note in their journals of events that occurred to them at home or in school and bring them to class the next week. Many students wrote about girlfriends or boyfriends, a "weird" teacher, or life on the street. I encouraged them each day, as we reviewed our journals, to write about real events, be it tiresome parents or an exciting new video, with as much humor as possible. After we discussed the situations that they had written about in their journals, I asked them to write one plot suggestion, or outline, of no more than three short sentences and a character sketch no longer than a paragraph. As a class we decided that our tabloid would be entitled: *REAL NEWS—YOU WON'T BELIEVE IT!*

For the creation of our tabloid, I divided the class into groups of two or three. The task of each group was to write one page of *REAL NEWS*. I suggested to the groups four collaborative writing methods from which they could choose to write their pages:

1. Each person independently starts with a plot outline and combines it with a character sketch to create a news story, deciding which responses to include from class discussion. I proposed this option because some students, particularly those with the poorest writing skills, were intimidated by writing in front of their peers. Sometimes it's easier for students to accept suggestions from the group if they first have the chance to write by themselves.
2. Students exchange their plot outlines and write their own character sketches into the new plots. I proposed this option because some students work well in pairs; generally, they are close friends and are comfortable with each others' suggestions.
3. Conversely, students exchange their character sketches and write them into their own plot suggestions. As with the previous option, some students work better if they are at ease with their writing partner.
4. The group decides its own method of working collaboratively.

Not surprisingly, all the groups opted for the last choice, which turned out to be a combination of all the other methods. It was the option I had hoped they would choose, one that allowed them to take creative control of their tasks, but I let them make the choice on their own. The benefit of this arrangement was that the various writing styles of each student could be accommodated. Those students who preferred to write alone, initially at least, could do so and still be a part of the group. Those students who were comfortable working in pairs could remain in the group, rather than drifting off by themselves to write in the corner of the classroom. And there was always at least one student who would suddenly feel comfortable writing because he or she had the support of the group.

"The students rolled their eyes when I quoted Malcolm Cowley to them: 'Be gentle with each other's efforts. Be kind and considerate with your criticism. Always remember that it's just as hard to write a bad book as it is to write a good book.'"

I asked each group to choose a recorder, whose task was to write down the changes the group made to the plots and sketches. Since there were no volunteers, which didn't surprise me, I became the recorder until other students later agreed to take over this task.

Next, I asked the groups to reduce their plot outlines to headings of only a few words. I reminded the groups not to criticize the author of the writing, just the writing itself. The students rolled their eyes when I quoted Malcolm Cowley to them: "Be gentle with each other's efforts. Be kind and considerate with your criticism. Always remember that it's just as hard to write a bad book as it is to write a good book." I randomly joined a different group each day, not as a teacher but as a participant. Sometimes the groups liked my input; often, they didn't and said they preferred to work on their own. After several sessions of writing, discussion, and compromise, we were ready to decide upon our final copy. By now the groups were comfortable with the suggestions of their members, although, occasionally it was necessary to vote upon which stories to include in the tabloid.

Here are two examples of the students' outlines:

Outline #1

Norton, the alien dog, likes to rap. He bites looters.

Her character sketch was this:

Norton has purple eyes and a cut-off tail. He has a fade haircut and wears glasses. His coat is orange with pink spots.

After some discussion in her group, her headline became: ALIEN DOG.

Outline #2:

Two basketball players have air pumped shoes. They have a contest.

His character sketch was this:

Wilbert and Wang wear green shorts and yellow tank tops. They have long hair and freckles.

His headline became: MEN BLOW UP PUMP-ING SHOES.

As we worked in our groups making final editorial decisions, often the discussion turned to other strange stories that the students had thought of and recorded in their journals. Sometimes a group reached an impasse on what to do, so I would leave the group I was working with and help the troubled group get past its dilemma. But always the discussion got back to how to make

each story interesting enough so that others outside the class would want to read it. The recorders wrote down each permutation of the stories, and we saved them all for future reference. Eventually, the groups decided on the final format of their stories. The ALIEN DOG group produced this final version:

Norton, the alien dog, had purple ears and gold rings on his paws that had no toenails. Norton had a cut off tail and weighed 200 lbs. He had a fade haircut and blue eyes, no nose and sharp teeth. He wore glasses and had a big head. His coat was orange with pink spots.

He was walking down the street with his friend named Charlie, the Wonder Dog. Charlie was a normal dog with the regular colors of black and brown. He was a pit bull. He was very vicious and liked to rap. He walked the streets a lot to stop thieves.

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When they first met, they didn't like each other. They were walking down the street and they started talking getting a territory dispute by talking raps bomb blast. Everybody started to run for cover. With all the confusion, some of the people started to steal stuff from stores. Charlie and Norton protected vicious alien dogs, so they began to take them away. The people wanted them to be free so they could protect the stores from the thieves. Eventually, Charlie and Norton joined the police force and became heroes.

I discussed with the students what they had written. The story had characters, plot development, action, description and a climax. Most importantly, it had meaning to the students because it was based on real-life observations, developed humorously. Potentially, it would be enjoyable to a tabloid audience because they had

probably seen similar events. It was obvious from our discussion, that the students felt good about what they had written, content that they had successfully tried to make some humorous sense of things they had witnessed. And they had produced stories which would engage their readers' interest.

After we finished our discussion, we took turns typing the final copy on the class computer. We used the spell checker and edited the copy for grammar and punctuation. We made copies of *REAL NEWS* and attached it to the school newspaper for distribution to the entire school.

The *ALIEN DOG* story succeeded because it contained most of the essential components of fiction: There was a strong plot, in which there was a distinctive opening, development, and a conclusion. There was fresh, descriptive language. There were memorable characters who experienced a change during the story. There were insights about the authors' world, a world in which there were territory disputes on the streets. Unfortunately, the authors' world did have violence, but the students tried to find humor and heroes. Finally, *ALIEN DOG* succeeded because

the piece would sustain the interest of its intended audience.

By producing a final, polished piece of tabloid fiction, my students experienced several key elements of group collaboration. Each student was responsible to learn all the material relevant to the task. Each group member worked interdependently with all the other group members. And all the students learned something about problem-solving and group decision making. They learned that they could produce "literature"—something that was not for a dusty library shelf.

I can't claim to have made bookworms out of my at-risk students, nor can I state that I have inspired any novels to be written so far by any of the *REAL NEWS* group. I allege no magical literary transformations in my street-wise, MTV-oriented pupils. I can say that I have seen more student poems and stories come across my desk. Perhaps the payoff will be in the future, when they remember that once a writing teacher taught them that reading and writing can be a personal enjoyment. And that their teacher liked to read *The Weekly World News*.