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TEACHING WITHOUT TEXTBOOKS: MAKING CREATIVE WRITING REAL

Sally J. Dorenbusch

At a time in my teaching career when I needed it most, two ideas I had experimented with off-and-on-again over the years (but with less than satisfactory results) came together and meshed beautifully. In fact, combining these two ideas—teaching without a textbook and fostering journal writing in and out of the classroom—has changed my approach to the teaching of writing.

Realizing that a creative writing class more than any other lends itself to experimentation *sans* textbooks and classroom walls as boundaries, I decided to forego my standard procedures. Instead of adhering to a mandatory text, required readings, and predictable writing assignments, I opted for a different approach to my creative writing class. The results surpassed my expectations. In summary, each student in the class wrote and published—under three separate covers—thirty to sixty poems, five short stories, and a one-act play. In addition, we published a class anthology of children's stories.

At this point, I acknowledge my debt to a major resource that inspired most of the poetry assignments that I used. Joseph I. Tsujimoto's *Teaching Poetry Writing to Adolescents* provided material, format, and direction for the writing of poetry. His approach is straightforward: begin where the students are and take them as far as they are able and willing to go in their writing of poetry. I took him at his word and used *his* approach to the teaching of poetry. And the results were spectacular—published authors.

Tsujimoto suggests that after thirty or so assignments, the teacher should publish each student's poems in a separate book and present it to that student. But I decided to take his idea one step further. If students

could produce their own volumes of poetry, then why not short stories and one-act plays as well? And so the course took shape.

From the first day of the semester, I had introduced my students not only to the idea of writing at least one poem a day but also to the daily expectation of reading their poetic efforts aloud in class. As might be expected, some hesitated more than others to share their poems, but with positive feedback a standard occurrence, soon all of my students readily participated in this daily course activity.

As the students continued to write and share their poems, I began formulating my short story and one-act play units by focusing on the innumerable writing contests arising from September through June that compete for the creative efforts of students. From these offerings, I constructed five short story assignments and concomitant course objectives: a children's story (for our class anthology); a holiday story (for the *Detroit Free Press's* November Holiday Short Story Contest); a holocaust story (for the March C.H.A.I.M. and the April International Holocaust Contests); a handicap story (for the February Special Arts Contest); and a mystery story (for the *American Accent* Short Story Contest).

By establishing specific audiences and publication goals for these assignments, I am able to help my students focus their stories more clearly around a specific purpose. I am also able to control— to a degree— the content of their narratives by stressing the publication criteria of a particular contest. For example, the handicap story must be converted to a one-act play before it can be submitted to the Special Arts Contest. But the present form of all of the assignments also makes them eligible for other contests such as the North American International Auto Show Short Story Contest in October, and the Scholastic Writing Awards and Young Creator's Contests in March. The contests mentioned here are neither mutually exclusive nor collectively exhaustive, nor do all students enter all contests. But they are required to submit at least one manuscript per quarter to a contest or out-of-school publication in order to experience an audience beyond their teacher and their classmates.

To this end, students can seek publication in such periodicals as *Challenge* magazine, *The High School Writer*, *Merlyn's Pen*, and *International Reader's Newsletter*. Again, this list only samples the market for student writing. The important point is that students become aware of an audience

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beyond their school newspapers and literary magazines. In my class, publication and contest awards earn automatic A's to be averaged in with the students' other recorded grades. As a further incentive, some of these periodicals—*Challenge*, for example—pay for published student work.

In addition to the rather impersonal public audiences for writing provided by the contests and student publications, I have been able to create a more personal and immediate audience by establishing a rapport with a third grade teacher and her students. Early in the term, and once the poetry assignments and class routines have been firmly established, I assign the writing of a children's story. From the start, students are made aware that their stories will be anthologized and that they will be reading their contributions to this class anthology. To date, all students have been willing participants in this class project, and the rewards for both students and teachers alike have been tremendous.

To prepare my students to write children's stories, I rely on two time-honored techniques: pictures and word lists. I have collected pictures from magazines and old books, put them in plastic covers, and grouped them in loose-leaf notebooks with various titles: People, Animals, Settings, Senses, Art, and Symbols. Before my students begin to write, I review the basic elements of plot, the plausibility requirements of fantasy, and the principle of the child as main character in realistic children's stories. Then I distribute pictures of children and animals to the class and instruct the students to "create" a children's story based on what they see or can imagine about their picture subjects. This picture approach usually generates creative responses, but for those who need additional inspiration, I present a word list consisting of fifteen concrete nouns. From this list, students are directed to choose five of the words and to incorporate them into a plot for a children's short story. A sample word list might look like this:

| | | | | |
|--------|--------|-------|-------|------------|
| screen | dish | sail | ruler | chimpanzee |
| well | sponge | fish | flood | strawberry |
| fall | raven | train | wire | spoke |

In constructing word lists, I try to include words that serve dual purposes. "Screen," for example, functions as both noun and verb, and "ruler" has more than one meaning. Such words enhance the story possibilities of the lists. Following these initial prompts to writing their children's stories, students

have about two weeks to complete their first drafts. After their children's stories have been carefully revised, edited, and retyped, I compile them in the order received for the anthology. I create a cover, title page, and table of contents; then I write a brief biography of each student author based on information gleaned from a brief autobiographic sketch written earlier in the term.

The next step is to take the books to the Oakland Schools Graphic Arts Department. We are fortunate in Oakland County to have access to Oakland Schools, a resource center for teachers. Among their many offerings is a printing service *par excellence*. Here, I order enough copies of our spiral bound books to present to each member of both my creative writing class and Kay Baxter's third grade class at Way Elementary School. Printing costs are shared by both my students and me.

Writing children's stories provides a challenge, printing class anthologies creates an incentive, arranging the field trip requires cooperation, but the reception of our efforts by the third graders encourages student writers and their teachers at both the elementary and the high school levels to continue learning and teaching the writing process. What more could two teachers desire?

After all of the stories have been read, the third graders treat the authors to home baked cookies, and the authors mingle among the youngsters and sign their autographs in the anthologies. A page titled "Meet the Authors" is included in the short story collection for that purpose.

A follow-up to this activity, of course, is that many of the third graders write thank-you notes to the high school authors. From the inception of this project, some of the concerns voiced by my senior creative writing students included whether or not these third graders would like their stories, whether or not they would be able to read their stories well for their audience, and whether or not they would receive any fan mail when they returned to Andover. I am tempted to say that my students' fears were groundless, but I know better. Their concerns are the legitimate concerns of all writers. I am happy to report that their efforts were well received.

As the course proceeded, my students published their poetry, their five short stories, and their one-act plays. They could order as many copies of their own works as they wished. Several opted to order a number of copies to give as gifts to friends and relatives. I made it a personal policy to order

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and pay for at least one copy of each student's works to use as models for future classes.

In preparing their books for publication—approximately one book per five-week term—students designed their own covers, created title pages and tables of contents, and up-dated their autobiographies for inclusion in each of their books. In the process, I had fulfilled one of my teaching goals: to get students to be better editors of their own work. Preparing their manuscripts for actual publication moved them closer to that goal. In fact, one of the bonuses for me of encouraging my students to seek a wider audience for their writing has been the positive reinforcement for the rules of style, usage, and manuscript form that the contest rules and editors of student periodicals insist upon.

Throughout the course, those students who need more help than others or those who just want to share their creative ideas are encouraged to come to writing lab on a regular basis. At Andover High School, writing lab consists of one hour of a teacher's day scheduled for conferencing with individual students about their writing. Writing lab is a concept rather than a place, though most of us confer with our students in the media center. Scheduling, however, is flexible enough to allow English teachers to meet students before or after school, or during their lunch, prep, or duty hours rather than during their actual, scheduled lab hour. In writing lab, students receive one-on-one writing instruction tailored to meet their particular needs. By requiring each of my own creative writing students to attend writing lab at least once every five weeks, I have the opportunity to talk privately with reluctant students who sometimes perceive writing as just something English teachers like to assign. And while I like to think that these discussions penetrate some of their barriers to writing, I know that the value and success of writing conferences rests with students who have ideas and who seek direction and advice on writing projects they themselves have conceived.

I approach the final challenge of the course— to write a one-act play— by asking students to "adapt" a short story classic for the stage. Of course, once I make the suggestion to consult another author's work—almost anathema in our profession's unflinching assault on plagiarism— some students announce their intentions to create their own plays. I encourage either originality or adaptation to accommodate both the time-driven and the free-spirited student.

My first venture yielded minor masterpieces: adaptations of James Thurber's "Many Moons," D.H. Lawrence's "The Rocking-Horse Winner," and Shel Silverstein's "The Learning Tree." The humorist of the class wrote a play about a boy's visit to the dentist, and the scholar of the class wrote a serious symbolic play about the ages of man which the acting class plans to produce during its one-act play festival. I must admit that this particular extension of our creative writing efforts beyond the classroom came as an unplanned bonus. But I see now that the fine arts department offers my students yet another audience they can strive to reach with their writing.

These writing projects represent but a few of the possibilities of teaching creative writing without a textbook. In fact, since first semester ended on such a harmonious note, I used it as a prelude to a more fully orchestrated second semester of student writing, publishing, and performing—with one addition. Having relegated the textbook to the reference shelf, I enhanced my class by revamping my approach to journal-writing, something I was inspired to do after reading "Liberating the Urge to Write: From Classroom Journals to Lifelong Writing" in the November, 1989, issue of the *English Journal*.

At first Anne McCrary Sullivan's article suggesting that class begin with journal-writing raised doubts. How could it work when the beginning of each class is fraught with students asking questions and relating their problems in an almost frantic attempt to delay the start of class? Putting off the inevitable seems to be a way of life for some high school students. This is the most disconcerting to prepared and organized teachers. But, Sullivan's article on journals offered a solution. The results were nothing short of amazing—students begin class on time.

In a nutshell, students purchase a permanently bound, blank book to be attended to daily at the start of each class. Students are expected to read or write in their journals for a time to be determined by the teacher. I usually allowed ten minutes at the beginning of class. The students took to the practice willingly. As they confessed in their end-of-the-year evaluations, the journals gave them time to think their own thoughts, to solve their own problems, to plan their own lives. The journals also sowed ideas that germinated and developed into full-blown pieces of creative writing that met the requirements of my formal assignments. In a sense, my students created their own textbooks for writing and learned to think for themselves in the process.

My decision to teach without a textbook did not eliminate my need for resource material; in fact, it probably demanded more. But at the same time, it stimulated my imagination and rejuvenated my enthusiasm for teaching. In addition to adopting the journal procedure as outlined in Sullivan's article, I retained the two basic principles derived from Tsujimoto's work: the format of my poetry assignments, and the idea of publishing student texts. My student's journal writing allowed them to turn inward to discover their own voices, and publishing their own books allowed them to turn outward to share their discoveries with others. The combination worked well to make creative writing real.

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