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Finding Voice and Building Confidence through Persona Poetry

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"For a writer, voice is a problem that never lets you go. . . if for no other reason than that a writer doesn't properly begin until he has a voice of his own."

—Alfred Alvarez, *The Writer's Voice*

The Background: Voice

When I started teaching eighth grade English nine years ago, I was convinced voice was something writers either had, or didn't. *Voice*. . . that elusive writing trait defined by "the golden thread. . . the heart and soul of the writing, the magic, the wit, the feeling, the life and breath" (Culham 83). I marveled at how English teachers could be charged with teaching a skill so subjective it could be defined by metaphor alone. Heart? Soul? Magic? How does one teach a student to demonstrate these traits in his or her writing? I had no idea.

Not surprisingly, only a handful of my eighth graders showed strong voice from day one. Their introductory letters to me were two- or three-page anecdote-filled essays with voices rising off the pages. Each spoke to me directly, painting a clear picture of his or her uniqueness. But, sadly, too few letters fit this description. The majority of students answered my questions dryly, one sentence at a time, with no elaboration, no sense of who they were as young people. As a reader, I was left with little connection to the writing at all. With disappointment after reading these letters, I recognized that my beliefs I held coming in that year seemed validated: perhaps a writer's voice is something with which one is born, like the innate talent found in a singer's voice.

I raised a main question: if the skill hadn't been cultivated thus far in the students' writing

careers, could it be done at all? I decided I would teach voice as thoroughly as I would teach the other six writing traits (word choice, sentence fluency, organization, ideas, conventions, and presentation (Culham) by presenting a strong definition and many examples. The looming expectation still troubled me, however. I needed to find a meaningful way to teach students how to demonstrate voice in their writing.

The Background: Confidence

The second matter unveiling itself before me was student confidence, or I should say, lack thereof. If the "golden thread" of voice seemed frayed, then their confidence as writers was almost nonexistent. The negative attitudes surrounding the subject of writing in general, were overwhelming. In their initial letters to me, several students shared horror stories from past writing experiences:

- "Every one of my papers came back covered in red ink."
- "She said I wasn't trying hard enough on my papers. But, I really was trying."
- "I used to like to write, but no one ever thought I was any good at it."
- "I suck at writing."

Somewhere along the way, I wasn't sure where, confidence levels had been squashed—reduced to a level so low it was no wonder students could not find their writer's voices. It was becoming apparent they were afraid to write at all.

If they believe they can't, they won't. . . but if they believe they can, they might.

Anyone who has spent time around teenagers knows that getting thirteen-year olds to try anything new or uncomfortable is a task in itself. Add prior bad experiences or low self-confidence to the novelty of the situation and the resistance is compounded. They won't take chances, they won't risk failure, they hate to look dumb or disappoint. Even with these roadblocks, if confidence can be built, albeit slowly, and a belief in the potential of success can be instilled, I thought my group

of thirteen-year old students just *might* take that leap.

In “might” lies that window of opportunity, the tiny crack where students open themselves to risk, that excites me most about teaching. “Might” offers the chance to create writers where they don’t feel they exist. I found once students hold a belief and confidence that they *can* write, they are then able to move into the next stage writing: honing the skills that lead to competence and mastery.

Something had happened to these students to shatter their confidence, and it didn’t matter at that point what. If we were going to make it through a year of writing together, I knew I needed to find a way to move their attitudes at least back to a neutral point, before I could even think of moving them in the positive direction I believed they could go. With the majority of my 120-student team lacking confidence and/or voice, I set out to find a way to help my students discover both within themselves.

Voice Lesson: Shifting the Paradigm from Writer to Writing

In *Voice as Process*, Lizbeth A. Bryant “shows how the writing classroom can be a tricky ‘construction zone’ where students work out different voices or styles” (Elbow ix). “Construction zone” is a perfect metaphor for how we first begin to shift the focus away from the personality of writer and place it solely on the writing. One building brick at a time.

As an introduction to the voice lesson, I use *Voices in the Park* by Anthony Browne as a mentor text to present students with one story told from four different character perspectives: a dominating mother, a depressed father, a lonely little boy, and a lively, outgoing little girl. After I read the story out loud to the class, students break into small groups to discuss the four different personalities, as well as what the author did in the writing to show that the characters were different. I then solicit responses from group members and record their evidence on chart paper at the front of the classroom. Some of the responses to the question “What did Browne do to show the different character personalities?” have included: used different word choices for each character; used strong adjectives; differed dialects for narration; and used different plot perspectives. Students can see that the characters’ traits

were built through the actions and descriptions. Browne, of course, is the author of the story, but the characters in this case, are the ones with the voices.

Again focusing on the writing (and not the writer), we build understanding further by looking at longer narrative excerpts with strong voice. Edward P. Jones’ short story “The First Day” is written from a first person, female narrator’s point-of-view, as she looks back on her first day of kindergarten. When read aloud, the narrator’s voice, a young African-American girl growing up in the city, is strong; the details vivid:

On an otherwise unremarkable September morning, long before I learned to be ashamed of my mother, she takes my hand and we set off down New Jersey Avenue to begin my very first day of school. I am wearing a checkered like blue-and-green cotton dress, and scattered about these colors are bits of yellow and white and brown. My mother has uncharacteristically spent nearly an hour on my hair that morning, plaiting and replaiting so that now my scalp tingles. Whenever I turn my head quickly, my nose fills with the faint smell of Dixie Peach hair grease. The smell is somehow a soothing one now and I will reach for it time and time again before the morning ends. (27)

When I reveal to my students that the piece was written by a male author, they are surprised to find out a middle-aged man like Jones could write so expertly from the perspective of a young girl. We discuss how this is possible and on what experience could he have drawn to write so convincingly. Again the students arrive at the conclusion that it matters little who the writer is, the writing can still have voice. Here, the focus of the lesson has shifted further from whether or not the writer has personality, but whether or not there’s personality evident in the writing.

They Certainly Might

After reading one or two more excerpts using this same technique of examining texts for evidence of voice, we move to the “try it” stage. I have students fold their paper into thirds, letter style, to give them a visual of how much

they should write for each step in this next process. I then ask them to think of a tangible object that they treasure, and write it on the top line of the paper. Some choose their iPod, some their pet's name, some their basketball; it only matters that what they select is tangible. The next step is to ask them to describe it (if your students have been trained in Barry Lane language (Lane), as I teach mine, ask them to write a *snapshot*). They should only write to the end of the first fold in their paper. Here is an example of one student who wrote about her cat, as her eighth grade self, complete with early eighth grade punctuation: "My cat is HUGE!!! She weighs about 20 pounds! Her name is Buffy because she use to be a buff color when she was a kitten. Now she is all different shades of gray, blue eyes and a short corkscrew tail."

Next, students travel back in time thinking of themselves as a five-year old, and describe the same object as if they were writing from that age and perspective. Again, the only other directive I offer is to write to the next fold. Here is the same student, writing as a young child: "Buffy is my cat. She is fat and gray. She is really funny. She chases string around the house. I love her." Instinctively, this student knew to write in simple, short sentences, with the developmentally appropriate voice of a kindergartener.

Lastly, I ask them to write a third snapshot of the object, but this time from elderly person's point-of-view; from someone with a lot of life experience. How would that person describe the object? This is a little tougher for eighth graders because they have limited life experience from which to draw: "My cat has been a great friend for as long as I can remember. Each morning when I get up, she's at the end of my bed blinking at me with her sky blue eyes." Even with no other directions, it's fun to see how, in this example, the same student attempts to make the language more sophisticated and mature.

Volunteers are then asked to share their writing aloud with the class, but the readers are not to reveal from which of the three sections or perspectives they are reading; that will be for the class to figure out. I'm not sure if it's because they think it's a guessing game, or if their confidence is already growing, but hands go up—way up! Even some of those who said earlier they thought

they were "no good" at writing are willing to risk sharing now. Each time a student shares, we take a class vote as to which perspective was represented and ask the writer if the majority were correct. I pose the following to the class: "How did we know? What evidence can we point to?" and again record the responses on chart paper. The final brainstormed list becomes characteristics that comprise the voice trait, e.g., perspective, style, word choice, sentence length, structure, etc.

Peter Elbow claims, "By analyzing the voice in lots of texts and by reading drafts aloud—and trying out different readings to manipulate the voice in various ways—we can learn to hear better the voice that readers are most likely to hear" ("Voice" 8). By this point in their development as writers within this unit, we have read aloud published works with strong voice; students have experimented by writing in multiple voices; they have identified the characteristics of voice in their own writing; and we haven't once mentioned whether or not the writer's themselves possess "heart, soul, magic, or wit." At this point in the "construction" process, students are now seeing voice traits appear in their own writing, even if they are only short excerpts written on one-third of a page. They are now starting to believe that they can conquer this entity called voice, and I'm seeing them gain confidence before my eyes.

The Final Test: I Will Just. . .

During my teacher certification program, students in the class Writing for Writing Teachers were asked to explore voice in writing. The professor asked us to read a mentor poem from *Necessary Losses* by Judith Viorst. The poem is actually a song sung by a stubborn four-year old boy while bathing each day. Through the strong voice of the lyrics (poem), the reader easily understands his frustrations with adults.

Our assignment was to use this poem as a model and come up with our own poem either written about someone (in the third person point-of-view), or written in that person's voice (in first person). It didn't take me long to choose the "someone" for my poem. At the time, my daughter was two-and-a-half years old, and was progressing through what would be a four-year "terrible two's" stage. Of course, I adored her, but she was adding craziness to an already stressful life. This persona poem, entitled "Maddie's Drummer," came quickly and easily, and is now the voice model I use with my students:

Maddie's Drummer

I will just stand here and stomp my feet.
I will just put my hands on my hips and stare you down.
I will just throw myself onto the floor until you pay attention to me,
and beam with playful delight when you finally do.
I just won't go outside, and once out,
I just won't come back in.
I just won't eat a thing 'cept spaghetti's or macaroni and cheese,
and I won't use a spoon once I'm down to the last noodles in the bowl.
I will just beg for gummy nummies and suckers and m&m's and chips,
and I will beg for them LOUDLY, only when you're on the phone.
I will find the eggs in the refrigerator,
and just crack them open on the carpet,
and ask, "wha' happen'd, Mommy?" when you see the mess.
I will go to the dessert social at my brother's school,
but I won't sit down like the other hundred and fifty kids.
I will just sing and dance and clap my hands,
and make sure everyone is watching me, instead of that silly magician they hired.
I will recite Barney songs and Disney tunes, over and over and over and over,
just until you think you see purple and live in Orlando.
I will get out of my bed at least five times a night,
and I will just crawl into yours, because I know by the fifth time
you'll be just too tired to say no.
I will be high-spirited, and independent, and challenging. . .
and I will be exactly like Grandma says you were
when you were a little girl.
And Mommy, I think I know just what you will do, too.
You will dig way down, and you will keep your cool;
You will take deep breaths, and you will find your strength;
and you will do the only thing you know how to do. . .
You will love me and love me and love me and love me.
Forever and ever,
to the moon and back again,
and with your whole entire heart,
anyway.

other than their own voice), I ask students to begin with the phrase, "I will just. . ." and craft their own. Confidence that had begun to build now takes off, as the pens seem to fly across the paper. If I give them five minutes of writing time, they ask for ten. If ten students raised their hands to share previously, twenty do this time around. Here's the result from the same student in the earlier three-perspective exercise, as she writes in her younger brother's voice:

The poem's simple repetition is safe, and because students are writing from someplace other than from themselves, the task is less-threatening. Inevitably, their poems have personality, because the poem's structure begs for it. The classroom culture shifts from those who didn't think they could before, to those who now start seeing themselves as writers, ones with voice.

In Reflection. . .

How I Know

How do I know if this progression of assignments works to encourage students

As a teacher, I've always felt it was important to risk putting my own writing out there. It shows students that I also practice writing and that I believe their confidence will grow with this voice lesson, as mine did; so next, I ask them to try it. After defining persona poetry (poetry written from the perspective of an object, person, or pet; from anything

to hear their voices, or even try them out? How do I know if I've effectively taught voice or if the students' confidence has grown? The evidence is there for me to say they've found their voices because I can hear it in their writing. Their writing shows flare, personality, that music

Have Fun Trying

I won't leave you alone.

You can't ignore me!

I can sing louder than that STUPID rap crap you listen to.

You can talk on the phone all you want. We have more than one.

I can listen to all the stupid stuff you ramble on about like make-up, hair, boys, and then hold it against you the next time you try to get me in trouble.

I'll go through your stuff and mix up your drawers so you can't find your clothes.

I'll beg to get on the computer as soon as you sign on.

When you say no, I'll read all of the conversations that you type and receive online until you get so fed up you watch tv.

When you're settled on a channel, I'll get the remote from upstairs and keep changing it.

As mad as you get, you can never stop loving me.

It's your job.

look back, it was so much fun...I even write a poem every night now."

I want my students to leave my classroom believing they can. No more papers covered in red ink; instead, young writers taking risks and trusting themselves, no longer feeling like they "suck at writing." As English teachers, we understand writing is a process. Whatever is written can be revised

and wit where the words were once flat.

As for assessing a growth in confidence, I know students have grown because the students, through their own reflections, have told me they've grown. In her end-of-year portfolio self-reflection, this same student shared the following regarding the poetry unit as a whole: "In my portfolio I chose pieces that I felt most confident in...I've always loved poetry but I haven't felt confident writing and sharing my poems until this year." Another student wrote,

I tried to include my best pieces in my portfolio, even if they weren't so good, so I can see how much I have improved as a writer throughout this year. I consider my poems not necessarily the best, but I believe they really show how I can put my words on the page finally...When I came into this class I always believed I couldn't write well because from teachers [in the] past, they told me that I could work on it because it wasn't very well written. They thought I could do much better. So I was self-conscious about my writing. But once we started writing [poetry], I began to have more confidence in my writing.

And lastly, from one reluctant male writer: "When I started writing poetry I thought it would be boring. Now that I

endlessly; there's always a better version waiting. But we need to get students enthusiastic about writing, without squashing them along the way. Indeed, they all have voices and their voices deserve to be heard. And what better, safer place to grow confidently, than through writing.

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About the Author

Jill Fyke (fykej@dexterschools.org) is an eighth grade English teacher and English department co-chair at Mill Creek Middle School in Dexter, MI. A member of the district Reading Apprenticeship and Leadership and Design teams, she devotes her time to literacy initiatives at the middle level. Jill participated in the 2009 Summer Institute of the Eastern Michigan Writing Project, and she is currently working toward her MA in English Studies for Teachers at EMU. She enjoys reading, writing, and family life in Pinckney with her husband and two children.

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If questions, contact Toby Kahn-Loftus by email at:

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