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Make Me See It!: Students Use Literary Devices in Their Writing

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“Night has brought stars which shine down like spot lights for this scene to be seen. They dance like fire flies dance through the fields. Night has brought the moon which laughs beams of white glory and cuts through the meadow like a sword cuts through a thick and twisted forest. Night has brought a girl who is more silent than Silence itself.”

‘Night’, Postcard Speech by Rebekah Drake

Her voice is hesitant and fragile as Rebekah reads her speech, making careful attempts to capture the mood of her writing with pauses. Her friends call her Beka, and they are amazed at her writing and speaking, not because she hasn’t ever tried to write effectively—Beka is a poet—her friends are amazed because this time the writing *is* effective. Beka is a tenth-grade student in my Speech I class. When I listened to Beka deliver her speech with such vivid descriptions and applied use of both figurative and sensory language, I couldn’t help but feel proud of her strong efforts. I listened to twenty-two short Picture Postcard speeches that day. Each of them attempted to effectively evoke an image in the mind of the audience using various writing strategies or literary devices. I began to reflect on the assignment that began the week and had resulted in these strong attempts from students to both write and speak effectively. Teachers search for, experiment with, and frequently create new tactics to support students’ abilities to develop their own writing. As I listened to those speeches, I felt as though I had stumbled on to just such a method.

Point of Origin (The Process of The Idea)

“What’s a metaphor?” Mike asked, blankly. At the end of my first semester of my first year of teaching, I was horrified to discover that most of the students had not retained information from mini-lessons I taught about literary devices. How could I spend so much time emphasizing effective writing structures and the connection to effective speaking only to find students were purging the information after tests and not really applying literary device to their own writing? (The span of time of combined mini-lessons felt like hours to me—I imagined students thought it was years.) Sure, students would pass the quizzes and short answer tests strategically administered throughout the semester. Sure, they would use a simile or metaphor when it showed up as a requirement on the assignment rubrics. Yet, students appeared not to ‘get it’. Why not use those strategies in written or oral communication—even if it wasn’t a ‘requirement’? The bland writing and responses students generate only when asked (or prompted) are cause for concern.

I understand students won’t always possess my interest in or passion for language, reading, and writing. I also understand a person doesn’t have to have an interest in those things to be able to use effective and expressive language when communicating verbally or in writing. I wanted so much for my students to have the ability to write or speak clearly. Still, if students are not *owning* the writing strategies—actually taking the ideas with them beyond my class—what is the point of devoting time to the teaching of such skills? I thought of a quote from William Glasser, “The information we are asked to memorize must be useful now or in the foreseeable future, or we won’t make the effort to learn it no matter how much we are coerced to do so” (51) and felt as though I had failed my students. If I am not supporting their learning with meaningful experiences, then the literary devices really are just equations to be memorized. Writing is a process; literary devices are tools that support clear communication. These cannot be memorized, they must be owned.

I decided to search out a culminating activity to the mini-lessons. I wanted a method or tactic to have students use strategies in their writing, and use those strategies intentionally, so that students would develop their own process for developing and revising their writing. Students should be able to deliver a speech using imagery, figurative and sensory language—*expressive* and *effective* language—an assignment that anchors the use of such writing practice. I wanted to find just such an assignment. One that would require students understand and use specific literary devices effectively (avoid cliché, etc.).

The assignment would demonstrate the importance of the literary device in effective speaking, and place focus on eliciting a specific response from an audience. I considered many ‘what if’s,’ including what if students tried to make me see something they could not physically represent. The concept of getting others to visualize an image would attempt to reach goals I wanted to meet. This idea also aligned with objectives in the textbook, as well as local and state curriculum. I wondered, What can I do to draw out effective writing from my students? The idea came first, then the details of the assignment.

Picture Postcard (Actualizing the Idea)

While at a conference, the ideas about creating a picture in the mind of an audience simmered. I began to sketch out what I expected. The idea took the shape of a postcard—not the “wish you were here” side of the postcard, the side with the image. I wanted students to write and speak in such a way they could make me see the image. Once I had the idea, the specifics began to fall in to place. I had designed a small writing project and this is how I use it in the classroom.

The Picture Postcard Speech is a one-week project during which students:

- *select an image,*
- *listen to model speeches evaluating language choices and writing effectiveness,*
- *complete a graphic organizer that generates an idea bank to use when writing,*

- *create a piece of writing intended to evoke the image in the mind of the audience,*
- *deliver the writing as a speech, eliciting the appropriate response from the audience.*

Monday begins the week with an explanation of the assignment. Class time is used to go through the rubric, ask and answer questions, and begin the process of deciding on an image.

“Do I have to show my picture to the audience?” Amy asked.

Jessica raised her hand, “What if I have an idea instead of a real picture?”

Students are permitted to choose any school-appropriate image, even one from their imagination. The images are not shown to the audience—instead emphasis is placed on deducing the image in the audience’s mind through effective and expressive writing techniques. “Make me see it with your words,” I say again and again. I explain that if students choose a picture they imagine and cannot effectively ‘draw’ the picture in my mind then those students have not met the requirements of the assignment. I point out it doesn’t matter if students can show me physical evidence of the image, they must write and speak the image clearly and effectively inside the minds of their audience. In fact, students are encouraged to *not* show the actual images to peers unless they are looking for feedback on their writing. The students must be prepared with an image choice on Tuesday when they arrive to class.

The first ten minutes of class on Tuesday and Thursday are spent listening to models of the assigned writing and then evaluating the writing through a whole-class discussion (*see Teacher Writing/Speaking Example*). I deliver a Postcard Speech, my own writing, as an example of the kind of speech they might hear on Friday. The topic of first writing sample I share is very dark; I wrote it during a time when my mother was receiving chemotherapy. This first postcard, shared on Tuesday, does not have a picture to go with it; this is an example of writing an image from the imagination. In whole-class discussion, students try to address questions written on the board. Who is

the audience for this speech? Does the writing fit the audience? What word choices and literary devices were used? Were those used effectively? Could the audience ‘see’ the picture? Did the speech stay in the moment and describe it effectively, or try to tell a story instead? Students are encouraged to call the speaker out (me) on elements they feel are not effective or that do not meet assignment specifics. The discussion often turns to the poetic or lyrical nature of the writing I share.

David wants to know, “Do I have to write a poem?”

“What if I don’t want to rhyme?” Derek exclaims.

“I think that rap stuff sounds cheesy,” grumbles Charles.

The assignment is designed to allow students to make choices about expressing the ‘picture’ to the audience. Initially, students choose the picture. Then, students must make choices about writing and word choice. I encourage students to consider more than just standard essay-style writing. Some students work better with poetry, others with dialogue. The focus for their expression again becomes on writing *well*. Students must decide how best to paint the picture in the minds of the audience. The class discusses the effects on the audience of poetic rhythm and word choice in the piece modeled and whether or not those elements of writing help the audience to ‘see’. When students begin to ask questions about the truth of my writing, I ask them what about the writing compels them to ask questions. Why do they want the story? What makes listeners want more?

Students discuss the results of ‘good’ writing; how it can make an audience (or reader) respond, either physically or emotionally. (I usually ask students to replace the word ‘good’ with ‘effective’, meaning the writing has an effect.) The speech modeled on Tuesday usually has to be delivered twice, as students develop their listening. By Thursday, students are identifying examples of alliteration, assonance, and metaphor without taking notes or having sections of the speech repeated.

Class time on Tuesday, usually devoted

mostly to the chapter text, is also given to students to begin writing their drafts. The rough draft isn’t started, though, until we work through organizing ideas and words about the image on a graphic organizer.

Representing and Organizing Graphically

On Wednesday, the class participates in an activity to complete a graphic organizer. I have students draw a five-column chart and then divide the chart in half. Each of the five columns are assigned to one of the senses; labeled Sight, Sound, Smell, Taste, Touch. We discuss how the last column can refer to both the physical and emotional nature of touch or feeling. It is also important to point out how texture or size can be addressed visually in the Sight column. I

like to use an oversize version of the image I use in my modeled speech for Thursday (students don’t know this yet) to begin this

part of the assignment. Students are asked to list at least five things in each column on the top half of the chart for the image I have selected. First, they list characteristics on the chart individually. Next, they share their favorite word choices with a partner. Then, as a class we create the chart on the board—sharing only the exceptional examples.

The second, or bottom, half of the chart is a place where I ask students to try to develop some of the literary devices that are not necessarily considered sensory language. This is the place where students can link and list words from the columns to create assonance, alliteration or onomatopoeia. This is also the place where connections are made between the image example, the lists of sensory words, and other objects or ideas to which the image or words can be compared. For example, my photograph of kids running on the beach at sunset drew out comparisons to runners at a marathon or packs of running animals in their

Students must decide how to best paint the picture in the minds of the audience.

habitat. “They look like shadows,” suggests Amanda. “See how the girl’s head is turned so she’s not looking at where she’s going,” points out Nikki. Then, one student suggested the concept of the children running at sunset to the way people try to stay ahead of schedules, try to run from time. This sparked discussion between students about how figurative language often draws comparisons between very unlike things to make a point. It also brought out further examples of unconventional ideas to compare with the image. Depending on the quality and direction of the whole-class discussion, this part of completing the graphic organizer could take fifteen to thirty minutes. The remainder of class is devoted to having students complete a similar chart for their own image. Students must practice techniques for themselves, for their own writing because “the approach that produces the best learning is focused practice” (Marzano, 142). Students must work through the writing process and using literary elements. Their own completed graphic organizer chart must be turned in with the final draft of their postcard speech. I try to go over as many of the charts during class on Wednesday.

Listening and Seeing

The entire class period is usually consumed by the speeches on Friday. The assignment requires that students speak a minimum of one minute. For some students, it is an enormous effort to generate the amount of words necessary to accomplish such a task -- all of 180 words. Many other students ask if they may exceed the time limit so they can describe more effectively. I remind them they have between one and four minutes to speak and that their effectiveness as writers or speakers isn’t always based on the quantity of words but the quality of their word choices.

Other students agonize with the development of their favorite literary device—Beka brought me several drafts of one section in which she attempted dramatic parallelism beginning a series of sentences with the word, “Night”. All of the varied student efforts are displayed during class on Friday as they perform the Postcard speeches. On the occasion that

there is extra time, I ask the class to verbalize any striking quotes, phrases, or ideas they might remember from the writing. I list responses on the board.

Ownership and Accountability

Night creeps slowly up like a thief waiting steal precious gold, and captures those last few golden rays of sunlight that were dancing aimlessly through the infinite trappings of the sky.

‘Night’, Postcard Speech by Rebekah Drake

The Picture Postcard Speech accomplished more than the original objectives. Though, I relished in watching and hearing students identify literary device and successful writing techniques throughout the semester and beyond. The Postcard Speech modeled the writing process and allowed students choice in topic. The assignment also gave students the chance to find their own steps in the writing process while following a set of requirements. By listing sensory words in the graphically organized chart, students also found ways of connecting to the concrete details and then taking figurative abstract leaps with their writing. Students found a voice of their own while still considering what wording or technique would move an audience.

After those mini-lessons about and after discussing many examples of literary devices, the Postcard Speech helped students become creators and operators of these language and writing strategies as well as planners who wish to create a specific response from their readership or audience. Students began to draw comparisons between reading and listening as ways of consuming language; writing and speaking as ways of producing and sharing ideas. Once, during a classroom discussion that took place sometime after the Postcard Speech, John said “I don’t see it,” as the class examined a piece of writing from the text. Other students nodded in agreement. That classroom was looking for a piece of writing to elicit a response; my students wanted to see or feel in response to the writing.

My thoughts about student ownership were resurfacing as I believe “teaching is not learning, that learning is something that occurs inside of learners when conditions are right; and [the teacher] sees the art of her work not in her own personal display, but in arranging those conditions for students” (Zemelman, 57). It was John’s student-voiced claim (even though it wasn’t directed at me) that made me believe the Postcard Speech did *something*. It is certainly not the only available tactic to help students anchor strategies in their own writing, but the assignment achieved goals I had set. I stood in silence, listening to my students make demands of writing, demands of speaking, and demands of themselves. Students began to raise their own standards for effective writing, listening, and speaking. And, where students are concerned, who could ask for more than that?

Night has brought peace to this land and no sound is made except for that of the wind which whistles its song over and through the tall blades of grass.

‘Night’, Postcard Speech by Rebekah Drake

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Suzan Aiken teaches Speech I for 10th Grade, Speech II/ Debate, Journalism, and a section of English Language Arts for the 8th Grade at Colon Jr. / Sr. High School. She is also the Yearbook Advisor / Newspaper Advisor. This is her third year at Colon. Suzan attends Western Michigan University in her pursuit of a Master of Arts in the Teaching of English (MATE).

My First Postcard

Teacher Writing/Speaking Example

This is a white room.
It feels blank, almost dead.
But it is not dead, this room. There is a hum, a vibration. The pulsating sound emits from the ominous enormous metallic machine. And the soft shoe click-clack of the white coat wearing professionals contrasts the shoeless shifting shuffle of the paper slippers on the hospital patient. This room is not dead. It only smells that way. Scents of sickness and death are muted and muffled by cleaning chemicals like bleach. As the patient passes, a faded whiff of soap and perfume permeates the air. They are all poised, still in this moment.

This room is not dead. It feels haunted. Echoes and shadows of what was, what is, and what will be. The clock is frozen at a place that marks afternoon. The silhouette of an owl, feathers fanned, displays shades of gray on the far wall by the door. 3-D watcher, harbinger.

This room is not dead but it is intended to kill. The elaborate machine with its plastic vinyl table is a horrible monster with a vacuous black open mouth, tongue wagging, waiting to trap its next victim. This dark device with its death distribution.

The silent invisible flame is an oven
concentration camp refugee is my mother
silver metal twists wraps swallows from
above'n
the laser precision ion emission
radioactive smother—

This room means death. White invisible death.
Death to cancer.

This is a white room.

(March, 2004)

My Postcard

The sun was gone but not forgotten. Reflecting what had been there only moments before, clouds and light still a velvety tapestry of blue and gold hanging on the sky. Birds like popcorn appeared and disappeared. Some were black dots silhouetted against the sky like typed letters on colored paper. Golden jiffy popcorn laughter, crackling fire giggles, children whose toes tickled from the cool water ran in the left-over daylight. Their bodies black shadows in the dimming light, but their smiles sparked and flickered glimmers for the camera. The waves rose, swelled, curled and crashed. The blue-black water draws back again. Little ones laugh and linger at the edge of the languid, lush, lapping lake. Both girl and boy captured in time, motionless in mid-sprint, sharing a mid-summer night's sunset. A splash from their prancing poised in mid-air, looking like drops of gold, drops of wax from the candle blown out. Daylight disappears. Warm summer nights like this remind me of what is important.

These samples, or models, or my own writing represent a "starting place" for students. I model the pieces of writing as speeches in class. I preface the speech delivery with disclaimers that welcome criticism and ask students to consider whether or not the writing actually meets the assignment requirements as well as whether or not the writing sounds silly (use of cliché, alliteration, etc. that sound "false") does not contribute to the imagery.

The samples appear to help students get comfortable with the use of language and the use of their own ideas. In addition, students are fascinated to hear my own perceptions and experiences regarding my mother's experiences with cancer and treatment, and my trips to the beach with my niece and nephew. They see connections between thinking and writing.

-Suzan Aiken