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Writing about school: It can be REALLY cool!

Julia Reynolds

During my first year of teaching, I taught a tenth-grade English class that consisted of thirty-two students and a “hodge-podge” curriculum. The main focus of the course was teaching the elements of literature through plays, short stories, novels, folktales, and poetry. I took this idea to heart, and soon my students were acting out plays, making crafts relating to the folktales around the world, and doing performance poetry that rivaled Poetry Alive! Yet, I soon realized that I was not doing as much writing as I should have been with the students. I was worried that if I stopped all the “fun” and began writing, I would lose the amazing energy in the class. I wracked my brain for weeks trying to figure out a meaningful way to approach writing with my tenth-grade students.

My favorite publishing company, Cottonwood Press, always seemed to amaze me with their unending supply of creative teaching ideas. I had first discovered them when I was student teaching in an alternative high school. My supervising teacher showed me some of her favorite Cottonwood Press books, and I began trying out their ideas with my classes. I was amazed at how well the students enjoyed doing the activities. So, as I faced the dilemma of trying to come up with a creative writing idea during my first year of teaching, I turned to Cottonwood Press to come to the rescue. If you don't know anything about Cottonwood Press (www.cottonwoodpress.com), it is a small company

based out of Colorado that has the philosophy that English should be everyone's favorite subject! So, naturally, I looked through the books that I had from them, and I found several interesting ideas in *Did You Really Fall into a Vat of Anchovies? Games and Activities for English and Language Arts*, edited by Cheri Armstrong. While the majority of the book has quick and fun ideas to do with students, the last section is entitled “Projects” and has four longer activities.

Of the four, the one that looked the most promising in helping me meet my goal of keeping the energy going was entitled “The School Guidebook: A Writing Project with Meaning.” The title alone intrigued me. I was looking for something that would be meaningful for my students, and not just feel like writing taught in isolation. In little over a page long, the project was described as students writing a “‘tourist’ guide book for their school” (Armstrong 76). It suggests that students interview administrators, secretaries, custodians, graduates, and anyone else who can provide information about the school. Also, pictures should be included of various people and places. Students write the articles, and they put the book together. It is important that students do the guide book. The teacher acts as a guide to help them get through it.

I loved this idea! I introduced it to my students, and while there was some initial groaning over the thought of doing any writing, students

quickly got excited about what they wanted in the book. I had students brainstorm any ideas they had as to what should be included, and I wrote their ideas on the overhead. Then, I had them debate the validity of each idea. We soon narrowed it down to almost one idea for every two students. I then had students pick which idea they wanted to write about, possibly with a partner. The various areas included school history, the principal, the assistant principal, the main office, the counseling office, the media center, homeroom, in-house suspension, food, sports, pep assemblies, clubs, dances, "what's hot/what's not," and community history. Students picked areas that they had familiarity with; for instance, a girl who worked as an aide in the main office chose that area. A student who often was in trouble chose to write about in-house suspension. Yet, as I continue to read more about students and writing, the research shows that students enjoy writing about things that they know best.

During revision, students were actively engaged in their writing, and they willingly read each other's papers and offered suggestions.

Once the areas were assigned, students began writing. I set up interviews with administrators and support staff, and students walked around the school, inquiring about fads, traditions, and the like. Only one day was spent drafting the articles, and the next day was spent revising. I read the drafts and wrote any questions or suggestions that I thought students needed to cover. During revision, students were actively engaged in their writing, and they willingly read each other's papers and offered suggestions. I collected the rough drafts and the final copies, and students were told to meet in the computer lab the next day.

Since this school did not have a computer network, I resorted to getting two computer disks to save the information. I appointed one student my assistant, and the rest of the students were told to start typing. Students who typed fast were given another article to type. As they finished typ-

ing an article, it was saved on disk. I also had two students going around the school taking pictures. Luckily, I often took pictures of the students at various events, so we had existing pictures to work from. Also, the yearbook advisor offered to let us pick out of the box of old pictures for anything else we needed, like graduation pictures.

I acted as the final editor. With the articles saved on disks, I was able to take my time reading each one and playing with font styles and sizes. I was very careful to not change too much of each article. The guide book had to belong to the students, so the writing had to be student writing, not revised writing by the teacher. I also had another English teacher and even my mother do some final proofreading of the articles. Overall, I was impressed with what the students had accomplished. The writing was fresh and honest, and they realistically portrayed what the school meant to them. Once I was happy with all of the articles, I printed each one.

Pictures were developed and gathered, and I even bought colorful, patterned paper for backgrounds. I took several pictures of the whole class and had students sign one of the pages. Students were asked to stay after school to put the book together. I was surprised at how many were willing to stay and how much they cared about the format of the book. It took two days to cut and paste the book together, and when it was done, I put the pages back-to-back into plastic page covers to keep them protected. Students had several ideas for the cover, so we voted in class the next day. It ended up being a picture of two Screen Bean figures shaking hands. The students said that the picture represented the teamwork that went in to putting the book together.

Now, the big question was what to do next? I brought the book to the principal to show him what we had done. I also wanted to know if the book could be printed for the students. He had an even better idea. He wanted the book to be handed out at eighth-grade orientation the following month. I was so excited! When I told my class, they fought over which ones of them would be able to present

it. We wrote a welcome at the front of the book, to explain the format to the eighth graders. The students conveyed that they had done the writing, and it was a student's point-of-view of the school.

Printing the book seemed like a hassle at first. Since the book was colorful and included so many pictures, I first inquired about making color copies. Yet, the cheapest we could find was twenty-five dollars a book. We finally had the local intermediate school district print it for less than a dollar a book in black and white, with a special system to make the pictures look clear. We even had the cover done in red with a white background, since red was one of the school colors. When the copies arrived at the school, it felt like a holiday. Each of my students got one, every staff member received a copy, and everyone seemed to love it.

At eighth-grade orientation, students were given the book as they arrived. I loved seeing several students glued to it and unwilling to stop reading in order to listen to the presentations. My students explained it briefly, and I told the crowd that the writing was done by students for students. Several parents told me later that their son or daughter read the entire book when they arrived home that night. I could hardly believe how much of a success this was turning out to be!

A few days later, I went with four of my students to present the guide book to the school board. Each board member received a copy, and they praised the work of the students. This attracted a reporter from the local newspaper who was at the board meeting, and he called me the next day to interview me for an article in the newspaper. The book was described as "... a place to turn to ..." for new students (Morrison 2). The reporter interviewed my students, eighth-grade students, and even the administration. The article in the newspaper was definitely a bonus for the project.

The next year, I decided to do the book again with my one section of tenth-grade English. The benefit I had now was experience. Plus, students had a purpose for writing it for eighth graders coming to high school. This class looked at the guide book from the previous year for ideas on where to

start. I knew that we could not repeat the "what's hot/what's not section," since that caused hurt feelings and a bit of flak the year before for students whose style was a "not." Since students loved the idea of that section, however, we compromised on just having a "what's hot section." I let the rest of the decisions be made by the students. They decided to take out individual interviews with administrators, and instead they profiled each of the eight ninth-grade core teachers. Also, they took out school and community history. They added spirit week, since they felt that new freshmen never dressed up in the fall. Beyond the initial changes, the rest of the process remained mostly the same.

This time, the eighth-grade orientation presentation is what attracted the attention of another reporter from the local newspaper. He called me the next day, and he also interviewed one of the ninth-grade teachers who was profiled. One of my students who was interviewed said "... she was especially proud of it because she has a younger brother who will start [high school] next year and he is already using the book" (Granderson 2). The reporter said, "Forget the red carpet. The incoming freshmen class ... got something better during last week's orientation—a guidebook" (Granderson 1). The article even included a color picture of my students and me working on it. Again, this was a bonus.

Doing a school guidebook is one of the most memorable things I have ever done with students.

I could go on to tell you about my experience the next year doing the guidebook in a new school district, working with two classes, having freshmen write it instead of sophomores, having a district network where students could save their articles, working with another teacher and his classes, and the hassle of having a public relations person in the district who had to read every word of everything that has the district's name on it before it goes out. I won't. The important thing is that the book did go out again, with a new title of

Freshmen Survival Guide, and it was given to eighth graders on the last day of school instead of eighth-grade orientation ("Keep them younger longer).

Doing a school guidebook is one of the most memorable things I have ever done with students. I had so much fun seeing my students get excited about writing. I think every school, regardless of the age level, should have a book like this—written by students for students—to help new students learn the "ropes" quickly. It is easy to do, and it just takes some support and a lot of commitment. Have fun!

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About the Author

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