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Blowing The Top Off The Credit Account

James Kuiper

Students who work hard are a joy to every teacher. If every student worked hard on every project, teaching would be a piece of cake. Classroom reality is, however, more complicated. All teachers run across students who are not motivated to work. Student motivation is a tricky thing on which to get a handle. I try to understand it in this way. I start the year with \$100 effort credit from each of my students. Every assignment I give them costs me some credit. Every day that passes costs me credit. Every thing I ask them to do costs me credit. When I think of it this way, it becomes obvious that \$100 dollars credit doesn't go far, and were I to let the account reach zero, my students would stop working for me. I would then have to keep them after school and call parents and deny privileges and such to still get the work out of them, but that work would be different. Work done under threat loses much of its soul, not to mention that it is simply no fun to teach that way. Thus it is my goal never to let the effort account reach zero.

I attempt to keep up the credit in many ways. Clearly stating expectations and rewarding success with grades builds credit with most, but not all, students. Establishing a respectful relationship with each student builds credit. A healthy pat on the back or handshake for good effort builds credit with any student. I find, however, that these are not enough. If I rely on these things alone, by the second semester, some of my students have stopped working; my account with them has become empty.

The only way I have found to keep my credit line open with my students is to give them demanding work and to support them so they can succeed. If students are faced with challenging work—things they haven't done before, maybe something they don't think they can do but are brought to success, then I find the credit line goes up, and I can keep them learning until the last day. To say "success breeds success" is too simple. I believe that the success must be significant and important to the student before it breeds more success.

My job then is to build structures where my students are challenged and can succeed. Portfolios are one structure that fits the bill. My kids have one main portfolio which they update all semester

for a grade which is 10%- 20% of their semester mark. This is a "showcase" portfolio into which they put their best work, along with a running journal about what they learned from the work and why they included it in their showcase portfolio. The content of this portfolio has some teacher-mandated pieces, such as their writing journals, with the balance being student choice. At the end of the marking period we have a wonderfully fat, rich documentation of what the students learned that period. It impresses upon the students what they have achieved. That builds up credit for the effort account.

We use this classroom portfolio, which includes all the writing the students have done, to spin off some smaller, more selective portfolios as well. I have found that local universities stand ready to accept writing portfolios for their education students to critique. My students build as many of these writing portfolios as we can get audience for, usually about three per year. Although they may choose which particular pieces to include, I require that they include many different types of writing such as poetry, essay, story, and autobiographies of themselves as writers. They also include a reflective piece on why they chose the particular writings they chose to include. My specific requirements cost me some credit, but less credit because they can choose which pieces to include. Student choice is a great credit extender.

My students approach these "university portfolios" with a serious determination to put their best writing before an audience. I don't believe that our society gives my students much genuine opportunity to participate in literate discussion. A seventh grader's halting attempts to communicate well are easily drowned out in the commercial screeching of media and the buzz of our busy lives. I understand that to have ideas largely ignored could cause one to give up, maybe to drop the effort account entirely. I am grateful that my students are resilient and that as they mature they continue to try to communicate.

Student discussion, held in writing groups, about which writings to include in the university portfolio has an intensity that is glorious for a

teacher to see. The editing for the portfolio drafts is done carefully, usually with two or three writing group editors backing them up. As is my students' habit in writing groups, they develop some focus questions for response to each of the pieces that they include in the portfolios. We pack the pieces and the focus questions in large manila envelopes and send them off. The intensity of the work has cost me much credit; sometimes the account is near zero. But there is hope for the account. From the moment students hand portfolios in, they ask me when the portfolios will be coming back.

I send the portfolios with a note to the university students outlining what some of the writing assignments were and explaining our writing groups and classroom portfolios. This helps them in their critique of my students' work and helps them write back to my students, usually answering questions my students have asked about the writings, often with a few suggestions, and always with lots of encouragement.

The day of returning portfolios is a festive one. With quiet, or not so quiet, excitement my students open the portfolios, and then my classroom sinks into still meditation while students read the letters of encouragement from the university students and then reread their own work with this encouragement in mind. They glow as they realize another person has taken their writing seriously enough to read it, think about it, and respond to it.

This is something that cannot happen enough to a student, something that our society doesn't do, something that I, with 120 students, cannot always do for them. When my students are taken seriously as writers, they not only are happy, but they work harder for me. With success like this, the credit account has the top blown off. They have tasted success and like the taste. They eagerly plan their next portfolio, and I can get them to write with gusto and lip-smacking until the very last minute of the school year.

About the Author

James Kuiper, a Red Cedar Writing Project participant and occasional university class presenter, teaches English at Hudsonville Public Middle School.