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Scott Sheedlo

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Finding Reasons to Publish Student Writers

Scott Sheedlo

The central act of the writing course is publication. This is the crucible where the student is tried, tested and taught.

—Donald Murray, in *Learning by Teaching* (144)

Finding Reasons Not to Publish

In my first three years of teaching, I often asked my students to think about the preparation of their final drafts of writing assignments as getting ready to be “published,” to remember this as the final stage of the “writing process.” However, despite such rhetoric, I had never provided them with opportunities to publish their finished pieces for an audience other than myself. Even though my pre-service teacher education had instilled in me a sense that I should be helping my students publish their writing, I found every reason not to do it; not enough time, too much work, uncooperative students, and the potential for embarrassed or hurt students.

In retrospect, I think the largest obstacle was my own fears. Publication was not part of my school experience. My writing was rarely read by anyone but the teacher, and therefore I felt uncertain that trying to publish my own students would work well enough to make the effort worthwhile. In addition, I was afraid publicly displaying the quality of their work might reflect poorly on my teaching. I think moving our teaching beyond our own school experiences and insecurities often takes new experiences to help us see the value in unfamiliar practices. Changing my attitude toward publishing my students’ writing took such a catalyst.

Changing My Attitude and My Teaching

In the summer prior to my fourth year of teach-

ing, I attended the Red Cedar Writing Project, a National Writing Project site at Michigan State University. The experience provided me with the resolve I needed to risk integrating publication into my own teaching practice for two reasons. First, I was asked to prepare a research project on some aspect of teaching writing to receive graduate credit, so I chose publication thinking it was time to face my fears. Second, I became a published writer for the first time when the editors of this journal, who were at the summer institute, included a poem I wrote in the fall issue (Sheedlo, 56).

Returning to school that fall with the intention of publishing my students’ writing firmly rooted in my thinking, I fluctuated in planning my classes between grand schemes that included a wide range of publication opportunities and far more modest attempts. Relying on the familiar, I went primarily with two approaches I had experienced in the Red Cedar Writing Project. The first was a weekly “read-around,” a variation on the author’s chair where the entire class forms a circle and each student has the opportunity to read an entire piece or an excerpt from his or her writing. The second was a class anthology, for which each student submitted a piece of writing of any genre chosen from the work they had done during the course. In addition, with the students’ help, my Advanced Writing class was also able to set up a World Wide Web site featuring their anthologized pieces.

Is Integrating Publication Too Time Consuming?

My students' enthusiasm for these experiments was leading me to believe that this practice did indeed deserve a more integral position in the curriculum. However, I quickly realized such a change would mean less time for other assignments. For example, with the class anthologies, the students were involved as much as possible with every phase of the publication process from creating the covers to collating and binding the finished documents. This took large chunks of class time, and as a result, my students read fewer pieces of literature than students in the same English courses taught by other teachers. This negotiation between the curriculum and time was a particularly salient issue for me, because at Ovid-Elsie High School, we are on a trimester, block schedule, which means I only have a group of students in a course for twelve weeks. Consequently, the insecurity of moving away from the comfort of what I had been doing continued to build in my mind, despite the promising results I had with these initial attempts to publish my students. Paramount in my mind became the question, is publication so valuable that it is worth excluding other assignments to make time for? To answer this concern, I spent much of the next summer reading all that I could find in the professional literature on teaching writing about the practice of publishing.

Finding Reasons to Take the Time

From my reading I was able to articulate an extensive list of reasons that relate to many aspects of developing students' literacy, and consequently, I have begun to understand why publication should have an integral place in a literacy curriculum. By drawing from the various reasons given by other teachers and researchers, I have organized a rationale around five principal reasons: Publication teaches and facilitates better adjustment to audience, multiple writing skills learned in context, improved and sustained motivation for writing, development of a more effective learning community for writing, and more critical and appreciative reading. But I want to make it clear before sharing this rationale that publication is an authentic, holistic activity, and, therefore, certainly runs deeper in its meaningfulness in encouraging student writing improvement than what is captured in this article. I suspect that if I ask published writers of any age about the value of the experience, I would continue to find new layers that I have omitted. Perhaps Anne Lamott may have said it best when writing about her first publication experience as a second grader in the introduction to *Bird by Bird*: "It provides some sort of primal verification;

you are in print; therefore, you exist." Still, the process of building a rationale has strengthened my conviction that publishing my students' work is worth both the time and effort. Having said that, I will elaborate on my rationale further.

A Rationale for Publishing Student Writers

1. *Better adjustment to audience.*

In the sixties and seventies, both James Moffett and James Britton suggested that studying traditional rhetoric does not help a writer understand how to craft writing to affect the audience because writing for an imaginary, standardized audience cannot reproduce the unpredictable, idiosyncratic response of actual readers. If writing is for the purpose of communication of some kind, the writer must have a chance to find out if his or her words are effectively reaching the audience in order to make adjustments the next time a writing task is undertaken for a similar audience.

The question could be asked, isn't the teacher an audience? The answer is yes, but not a genuine one, because teachers have a more complicated reading agenda than just making meaning of the pieces written by their students. Teachers often must read as graders, many times preoccupied with form and structure over meaning, and therefore rarely do they respond as actual readers to what they have read. Sladky has called this stance "meta-reading" (5). He observes:

It seems safe to say that, as writing teachers, we do a lot of things with the words our students produce, from analyze to interrogate to coach, critique and, finally, evaluate nearly every word that's written in our classrooms. What is interesting, however, is that rarely do we actually **read** those words. I mean read them as readers, not teachers, read a writer's words, for the gift of their insight and their meaning. (3)

I think this description frequently applies to teachers at all levels. Furthermore, it is at times an appropriate way for teachers to read their students' work to help them improve it. However, all the effort on the part of both the teacher and student is meaningless if the writing is never experienced by a genuine reader.

Students know this. They know we are meta-readers, and too many good students learn to please this sensibility rather than meet the challenge and reap the rewards of writing for an audience that might be captivated by their words. Too many struggling students give up after experiencing the futility of trying to please the evaluation-driven

teacher, and never receive the pat on the back for successfully expressing themselves. When I asked some of my students to write down the benefits they saw in the publication experience, one reminded me of this by saying, "I thought it was cool because our writing is going somewhere besides the trash."

2. Multiple writing skills learned in context.

Zemelman and Daniels argue that "Writing for real audiences creates natural pressure to edit that work—not because an English teacher will lower your grade for sloppy proofreading, but because you don't want the effectiveness of your message to be compromised" (197). Under such editing pressure, the potential for learning conventional usages, spellings, punctuation, and mechanics grows, especially if the student feels strongly about the intended audience for the piece. In such moments, teaching grammar in context takes on new meaning because the context is valued by the student. Lessons on all of the surface features of writing have the potential to become more focused and less time-consuming, with the evidence for mastery documented in the published pieces themselves.

However, other skills are needed by the publishing student writer that have more to do with presentation. In some cases it might be better handwriting; but word processing and desktop publishing skills, or even web-page-authoring skills, were more often the ones my students were interested in learning and practicing to present the work in an appealing, effective manner. The possibilities also include graphic design, photography, oratory; and with dramatic presentation costuming, set design, acting, and directing. Furthermore, embedded throughout the entire publishing process in a classroom setting is the need for collaboration skills: negotiation, time management, and problem-solving. My students showed me mastery of these skills far more often when publication was at stake, rather than just a grade.

3. Improved and sustained motivation for writing.

Effective writing will likely bring praise within a supportive classroom, which can be a source of motivation for the student writer. But the potential of this happening is minimized if publication opportunities are not available. In this case, the teacher becomes the only source for praise, thereby rendering it less effective as a motivator because, as motivation theorists point out, for praise to be effective, it needs to be credible, characterized by spontaneity and variety (Spaulding 33). Effective praise, while often difficult for a teacher to give with so many papers to read, happens naturally when-

ever student writing touches real people—other students, parents, grandparents, and other interested readers—through publication.

In turn, this motivation gives the writer momentum to face the next writing challenge. As Donald Graves explains, "Publishing serves as a specific anchor for the future during composing a new piece, publishing is a hardcover record of past accomplishments" (1983, 54). This sense of "permanence" is what sustains many practicing writers through difficult times. As I reflect on my classes, one of the problems I see with my approach was that I saved the publication until the end of the course. Although the book-signing party we had provided a sense of closure to our time together, my students left my classroom primed for more writing, but unlikely to do more without the structure of the classroom. Without sustained success as writers, many students may lose their confidence by the time they enter the next writing intensive class. I could have helped them to internalize that sense of confidence more deeply had I provided the experience earlier. Although Graves reminds us that the goal is not to publish every piece of writing (1984, 189), we must remember publication is part of the process of learning to write, not the end of the writing or learning process.

4. Development of a more effective learning community for writing.

Often frustrated by the lack of effort my students put into peer response and editing, I was happily surprised by the effort I saw many of the students make in helping prepare each other's pieces for the class anthology. Students can become a primary and critical audience in a publishing classroom, while still remaining sympathetic, because they are bonded by the shared problems of writing well, even though individual purposes may differ. Having a supportive, known audience helps a writer move toward writing for unknown audiences because it provides genuine response and the influence of other writers and their work, two essential elements of what Brooke calls a "writer's life" (13). I doubt that I would have had the confidence to publish for the first time had it not been for the response and encouragement of my colleagues in the Red Cedar Writing Project.

Murray offers another perspective on this line of thinking. The experience of finding an audience among the other student writers in the classroom helps the students find new topics for writing. He suggests, "It's not so much that they will learn from their peers' criticisms as that they are sparked, sometimes even inspired, by seeing what other people in the class can do" (133).

But even while publication provides a common

challenge which rallies classmates to be supportive of one another's writing in meaningful ways, it also provides cause for celebration because it is an occasion of accomplishment. Celebration is a significant force in strengthening the effectiveness of a learning community. About this significance Peterson comments, "What we celebrate in others we can find in ourselves. Such recognition makes achievement possible in all of us; we relive the celebrated events in the days ahead" (43). Some of the most satisfying moments I have had as a teacher so far have been celebrating the completion of a class anthology with my students during a book-signing party. On those occasions, every student could share in the accomplishment no matter what his or her writing ability level or grade in the course.

5. More critical and appreciative reading.

Calkins and other researchers have realized that students who write for publication read better because they become insiders who understand how texts are created, thereby demystifying the texts they read (219-243, Zemelman and Daniels 197). This occurs because learning to read and write well are closely related, or as Kutz and Roskelly describe them, "symbiotic." Analyzing further they argue, "Reading helps writers discover structures and forms and voices just as writing helps readers uncover meanings and strategies" (189). This was a comforting insight to me in my concern about my students doing less reading than my previous classes because as published writers they will be more likely to read the literature they do experience in my class and beyond with a more critical eye and appreciative understanding.

Final Thoughts

While constructing my rationale for integrating publication, one of the most remarkable things I found was that it has been used successfully at every level of schooling. The stories I read from teachers giving the merits of this practice came from the elementary, middle school and high school, and college levels, and the beneficiaries of this practice were students of all socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds and academic abilities. I think publication works on all these levels because it is an authentic, genuine experience that is rewarding and satisfying both in and out of schools.

Intuitively I felt this from the beginning because my father was a high school band director. I grew up observing how his students, a group in which I am included, benefited from the many opportunities to perform publicly. We had the chance to be congratulated for our practice in band class by countless people who enjoyed our public performances. Some of those people were motivated to be supportive for

no other reason than that they had been moved by our music. Publication is the writer's concert or parade. From a personal viewpoint, the strongest case I can make for it as best practice in my own mind is I can't imagine band students practicing every day and never performing in public. What an absurd thought. Therefore, I can't go back to my writing classes and ask those students to work just as hard on their writing and never give them the opportunity to have it read by anyone but me.

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About the Author

Scott Sheedlo, a Red Cedar Writing Project participant, teaches at Ovid-Elsie High School and often presents at conferences.