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Jennifer Ochoa

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Finding a Point: Making Writing Important for All Students

Jennifer Ochoa

Keith held the page with the trembly gentleness of someone holding a fragile eggshell. I had just placed in his hands the copy of his piece for our class book. His face stared in awed pride; he was looking at gold, something that would surely make him rich. "Be real careful, don't bend it or get it dirty. We still have to take it to the printer," I warned, "but that's what your page will look like, Keith. Do you like it?" He nodded and continued to stare, not wanting to return the page to the pile that would turn into our book, *Portraits of Lansing*. Keith was an English flunky. He was in the ninth-grade summer school class that I taught. And as he stared at the page, he knew he was a writer.

Summer School Students

Keith had a story like many of the students in this summer course. During the school year, he had hated his English class or, with the fickleness of a teenager, his English teacher. And so, in the ultimate act of adolescent punishment, he just refused to show up. Consequently, he failed. That's how I met him.

The students I teach in the summer are not very different from the students I teach during the regular school year. They come into my classroom hating to read and especially hating to write. Most of the writing experiences they have had have not been very authentic for them. They have been asked again and again to jump through the hoops of well-meaning English teachers, trying to teach complete sentences, paragraphs with topic sentences, and essays with five paragraphs that can never, never include the word "I." They do not see themselves as writers, nor do they see writing as an activity that has anything to do with life outside of school. And in most cases, no one has helped

them find a reason to make writing an important activity.

Writing and School

I teach ninth-grade general English in an urban school district. If you ask my kids what they want to do with their lives, they will invariably tell you that they will be doctors and lawyers and professional sports stars or some weird combination of the three. When I look at the students who have passed through my classroom and what they are doing now that they are getting to be grown-up, most of them are not on any of those professional paths. Some of my students end up going to community college, and some of them go to universities. But most of them seek vocations that do not require further schooling, or they get jobs at Meijers and have babies and settle into a life of just trying to get by. I think secretly they know that no crystal ball will foretell a future for them straight out of "Chicago Hope" or "Law and Order," and so, while their dreams are lofty, the everyday practices in English class, like formal college writing, are unnecessary in their eyes.

When I think about this, I think back to Keith. He was, by no means, a great writer when he entered my class. Nor did he see any purpose in his life for writing. My goal for myself as Keith's teacher and for Keith as a student was to make writing important in his life. I think for all kids in this situation and for all kids in general, they need to see the purpose and importance in learning a skill and completing a task beyond jumping through a teacher's hoop. Learning needs to be authentic. For kids who do anticipate college after high school, learning how to write is a much easier skill for teachers to sell. For kids with other life goals, selling the necessity of good writing skills

becomes much harder. Throughout my five years as a teacher, I have struggled with this particular dilemma. And then Keith and his classmates this summer helped me find my point.

I knew a lot about the importance of making a concrete audience accessible to kids so that their writing takes on real purpose. I frequently asked students to share their writing orally in small groups and with the whole class. I knew as a writer myself how important feedback was. I also constantly displayed their work in my classroom. However, displaying writing, while seeming to be a good way to “publish” their work, was not as effective as I wanted it to be—no one ever took the time to stop and read the writing on the wall. While I knew that actually publishing the students’ work would be a meaningful experience for them, drawbacks such as lack of district funds, kept me from doing it.

The Publishing Project

This past summer, aware that there was money in the budget, I requested and received money to publish a book with my kids. I knew that the writing needed to be manageable in order to publish it, since we only had five weeks to produce this book. I decided they would write short pieces — portraits of the neighborhoods they lived in. We started by reading pieces about neighborhoods from various places like *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros and *Night on Neighborhood Street* by Eloise Greenfield. Reading these pieces gave my students’ writing a context and a place for them to begin their thinking. Then they started writing. I told them from the beginning that we were going to write a book. They tentatively believed me, but I’m not sure they thought they would ever hold the book in their hands.

We proceeded as any group of writers would. Writing our pieces, reworking them, responding to the pieces others wrote, we acted like writers. For students who had not previously been successful in English class, grades were very important to them, but I wanted their writing to be more important. Because I was so sure our writing would become a book, I placed the emphasis in their grade on the book, not on the writing. For this assignment, they got the points for their piece appearing, not for writing and writing and writing.

As a teacher, I know not to count on all students to complete an assignment, and when I teach summer school with kids who are used to failing, the percent of people who do the work falls significantly. For this project, only two kids of forty did not write something. Some kids did nothing else all summer, but they made sure they got

a piece in the book. When I started to treat their writing as having an end purpose, so did they. They could see the point. They began to talk like writers and think like writers and act like writers.

The Impact of the Whole Language Philosophy

In the world of English education, none of this is revolutionary. But for the students in my summer school classes and for their harried teacher, writing a book was the most revolutionary and important thing we did with our summer vacations. Creating an authentic purpose, a real context, and an end result that is public are some of the basic practices for whole language instruction. Whole language is a philosophy I have enthusiastically embraced through my teaching career. However, I had never created the writing opportunity in my school year classes like writing a book. I never had time or energy or money for a project like that. Because of this summer, I will find the time, energy, and money for this kind of project every year.

The day the books came back from the printer, the day before summer school ended and they could really start their shortened summer vacation, a group of writers proudly shared their pieces aloud with the rest of the class. Each student asked us to turn to the page in the book that contained his or her piece, and we all listened as the author read. In their evaluations of summer school, the only question they had to respond to was “What was the most significant thing you did in summer school this year?” Every single student talked about being a published author. Keith even suggested that we send a copy of our book to “that lady we read about so she could read about our neighborhoods too.” “That lady” was Sandra Cisneros, the author of the book we read.

Conclusion

My good friend teaches science at Keith’s home school. On their first day in class, my friend asked the students to tell everyone what they did over the summer. When it was Keith’s turn, he replied, “I became a published author.” She said everyone in the class wanted to know all about what he wrote and asked him to bring in his book. When she related this story to me, I knew I had finally found my point as a writing teacher for my kids.

About the Author

Jennifer Ochoa, a Red Cedar Writing Project participant, teaches ninth-grade English at Sexton High School in Lansing.