Language Arts Journal of Michigan

Volume 12
Issue 2 *In Celebration of Teaching and Learning*

Article 5

1996

You Gotta Have Faith

Greg Leitner

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm>

Recommended Citation

Leitner, Greg (1996) "You Gotta Have Faith," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 12: Iss. 2, Article 5.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1480>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Language Arts Journal of Michigan by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

You Gotta Have Faith

Greg Leitner

By the time students reach their junior year of high school, they have spent thousands upon thousands of hours in classrooms. They have been in classrooms with all sorts of different teachers who have conducted all sorts of different lessons. Curious about what kinds of lessons my students liked, I asked them why some lessons and activities worked well and others did not. As they expressed their opinions about good and not so good lessons and activities, a predominant theme emerged—they overwhelmingly favored lessons and activities that actively involve them in the learning process.

As a result, I have been investigating ways to include students in lessons, involving them so they are active and engaged instead of passive and seated all the time. When I first began to involve students more directly, no one needed more convincing than I did that they were capable of doing more worthwhile and exciting things than sitting in a desk and staring, mostly blank stares, back at me. Slowly, I convinced myself, or rather the students convinced me, to have faith in them. They showed me, by their enthusiasm and commitment, that they were capable of much more than I had given them credit for. As a result of the talent of my students, I have expanded student involvement in my lessons in the past few years, putting more faith in their ability to learn as they lead. I have divided the lessons and

activities that put faith in the skills and talents of students into three types: suggestions from students, working with students, and using students as teachers.

Suggestions from Students

Perhaps the easiest and safest way for teachers to put more faith in the students and involve them more directly in the learning process is to tap them as a source of ideas. While some student ideas are not appropriate, using students as a source of ideas usually works because we as teachers can take a look at all of the ideas ahead of time and use only those we feel are likely to involve our students. Furthermore, asking students for feedback on activities and assignments is something I was comfortable with in the beginning because it did not involve much risk on my part.

Students often have provided me with specific and enlightening suggestions after an assignment or unit has ended. Originally, I imagined most of their suggestions would not be very thoughtful, but I quickly learned how wrong I was and how perceptive students can be. I have used their suggestions to improve my instruction and assignments much more than I ever thought I would. However, this practice has other, perhaps more important, benefits. Collecting and using student feedback to help improve instruction tells

our students we value their input. It shows them they are partners in learning, not simply passive individuals awaiting our expertise to enlighten them. Moreover, receiving and acting upon some of their suggestions is the first step toward encouraging them to take more active roles in the classroom.

The next step in my growth in putting faith in the students was to design an assignment together with them in class. This is certainly riskier than receiving written input and sorting through it privately, but it has worked better than I thought it would. Not only have my students thought of some specifics I would have omitted, but often they also have invented more creative and engaging assignments than I would have on my own. Another surprising characteristic of assignments developed with student input is that many are more stringent and demanding than those I design on my own.

Recently, I took the process a step farther and met with a student over the summer to receive student input as I planned a new class. Having never attempted anything like this before, I was not only amazed by the amount of information and ideas suggested by one student, but I was surprised by the care and the thoroughness she took in working through the ideas. What's more, some of her ideas never would have occurred to me. One of her more creative ideas was to turn a play into a comic strip as a way to review before a test. Another of her ideas had students assuming the role of a character in the play and writing "Dear Abby" advice column letters which other classmates would answer as an advice columnist might respond. She also commented upon materials and activities from teacher source book materials I had reviewed. She gave me the student perspective on which activities would interest them and which would likely bore them. I valued her input and feedback; more importantly, I think her assistance prior to the teaching of the class made the class more interesting and engaging for all the students. Perhaps I should have involved more students in the planning of the class. The ideas and input I received might have been even more varied and valuable.

Simply asking students for their feelings and reactions to assignments and activities is an important step in showing students we have faith in them. These requests foster trust and help break down some of the walls between teacher and student, and they set the foundation for real collaboration and projects with more student involvement.

Working with Students on Projects

Probably the easiest project for teachers and students to work on together in the English classroom is writing an essay. Many of us have completed the writing assignments we give our students in the belief that our participation validates the process for our students. For instance, when we join the editing group with our own essay, our students see our belief in the process. If we think feedback and response are important, perhaps they will too. I have found some students to be tentative in their acceptance of the teacher in the editing group at first; perhaps they are not accustomed to teacher involvement in this respect, or perhaps they are amazed that teachers take student assignments seriously, or perhaps, for some, the teacher's presence is intimidating. Whatever the source of reluctance, it most often dissipates quickly. Working together with students in writing groups is also an excellent way to begin building learning communities.

I have experimented with a couple of other ideas with writing and have had excellent student acceptance. The first instance involved an article I was writing for a professional journal about a literary festival one of my classes held. I asked the class for volunteers to critique my drafts, and four students accepted the challenge. Since the class and I worked together to create the festival, I hoped the student editors would provide feedback about the content of the article as well as its style and presentation. My student editors provided feedback on two of the drafts, admonishing me for some of the same shortcomings I observed in their writing: "Mr. Leitner, your first draft was really bad!" wrote one of the student editors. Taking a chance on student feedback shows them that teachers really do value feedback and, even more importantly, that we feel they have impor-

tant feedback to offer us, too. Moreover, simply working together emphasizes the collaborative nature of learning too often absent in the classroom.

In another instance, I took the process to the next step and wrote an article for a professional journal with a student. In fact, more than half of the article was written by the student. The article sprang from the input she gave me as we worked together to plan the class mentioned earlier in this article. We worked together on all stages of writing the article—from the idea itself to the submission of the manuscript. Frankly, I was amazed by the care and dedication of my student co-author. She had always excelled in the classroom, but she surpassed even my lofty expectations as we worked on the article. Writing an article with a high school student is perhaps an extreme example, but one that underscores the point that we need to put more faith in the skills and the talents of our students to do things we might not have expected they could do. This project is yet another illustration of the partnership in learning I believe is important to establish with our students. Recently, my student co-author and I were notified that our manuscript soon will be published.

Students as Teachers

Using students as teachers carries much more risk than using student suggestions or working with students on specific projects. At times, disaster is the result, (actually, it seems ready to pounce at any given moment) but in my experience it has been the exception. I am not advocating abandoning our responsibility as teachers; rather, I want to find ways to enhance students' involvement in the learning process and increase ownership of what they learn. I discovered that students can direct or present many worthwhile activities. Much more preparation and lead time are involved in these projects in order to ensure success. However, with careful planning, the risk inherent in students teaching or leading activities can be managed, and the results are well worth the risks.

One way students can function as teachers is to have them introduce units. I have found the

most success in the introduction to works of literature. In one of my classes, the students complete a research paper on an author they studied in depth. Later in the semester, if the class is reading a work by an author researched by a student, I ask that student to introduce the writer to the class. For instance, one student who studied Hawthorne a year earlier agreed to present her talk about Hawthorne to my current class as they started their study of *The Scarlet Letter*. Not only did she present some background information about thematic issues in Hawthorne, but she also devised a simulation and discussion to engage the class in the major issues of the novel, far exceeding anything I had expected in her introduction to the novel. In short, her introduction was both informative and engaging. Her lesson gave the students some specific experiences they could easily access during their study of the novel. Later, as the class read the novel, the students often referred to her presentation and simulation. Similarly, a student's introduction to Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* was so interesting and well-researched that it became the cornerstone of the study of the novel. As her classmates discussed the novel, they constantly referred to her introductory comments. Throughout the unit, she was the expert on Steinbeck and often was called on for her expertise. In these instances, putting faith in the students was more successful than I ever imagined it would be.

I have had success in other situations with students teaching class. A former student returned over winter break his freshman year in college to teach my poetry class for a day. At college, he had just finished a class in writing poetry, and I thought he would be an excellent speaker for my poetry class. His lesson was thorough and held my students' interest. It was good for my students to see such expertise in someone only a year older. Not only did my former student share his insight with the class, but he also guided them in writing a poem. Another former student returned to discuss a poem she had published. Through her presentation and discussion my students gained valuable insight into the creative process. On the surface, these two instances of putting faith in the students

seem to be risky because I had little influence and prior knowledge about the content of their lessons. However, my experience with these former students gave me confidence in their abilities.

The use of student assistants in our school is another way to put faith in the skills and talents of students. Student assistants help in a variety of clerical tasks, such as typing, filing, running errands, xeroxing, and cleaning. Recently, I utilized a student assistant in a class the student had taken the previous year. Since the student wanted to teach English at the secondary level, she agreed to lead some activities from time to time. During the semester she led discussion a few times, conducted a brief review session, critiqued drafts of essays, taught a two-day unit on a major poet, and coordinated the production of a play the class presented. Since I knew the student well from past classes and projects, it was not a major leap in faith for me to turn over the class to her for a day or two. Moreover, not only did my current students benefit from her knowledge and enthusiasm, but the student assistant also was able to preview her future career as a teacher.

Drama units and drama classes are excellent opportunities for putting faith in the skills and talents of the students. Students are eager to demonstrate techniques and assignments. Improvisational games are time-honored techniques drama teachers use for warmups and to encourage creativity, build cohesiveness, and introduce new concepts. Most of the time, students are willing leaders in these games, and they introduce improvisational games I am unaware of to the class. For instance, a freshman in this year's drama class introduced an improvisational game for pantomime skills, explained it to the class, demonstrated the game, and then conducted the class for half of the period.

When my classes study plays, I often have students from the previous year's class demonstrate a scene from the play so that the current students see how they might present a scene. Another example is the play one of my classes stages annually. A few years ago, I decided to use student directors for this project and have been pleased with the results from year to year. The

directors do everything a director should do—cast the play, hold production meetings, direct rehearsals, trouble shoot, encourage, cajole, and so on. Although I meet with the student directors to discuss what will happen in class and to plan rehearsals, the class period itself is entirely in the hands of the student directors. The student directors are organized, thorough, creative, and adaptable. The students are well prepared and leave little to chance; they use the class time well. Due to the efforts of the student directors, all of these productions have excelled in creativity and enjoyment. I am also somewhat surprised it took me so long to see the obvious—that students could do such an excellent job in this activity.

All of these experiences lead me to conclude that students can be excellent teachers in the right situations. This was illustrated once again in a recent collaboration—a project involving me, four other teachers, and about 130 students. My school has a program for freshmen called “Cross-Curricular Connections” which combines the efforts of four teachers (English, mathematics, social studies, biology) in a collaboration of instruction. I saw this as an opportunity to test my belief in the skills and talents of my students. The English teacher of the 130 freshmen from the Cross Curricular Connections program and I, as a teacher of a senior seminar in Shakespeare, decided to collaborate on a project involving *The Comedy of Errors*. Basically, we decided my seniors would lead a four-day unit to involve her freshmen in the play by helping them learn to deliver and then adapt a short monologue from the play.

A week prior to the collaboration, my students prepared monologues from the play and then adapted each monologue, say, into contemporary language, or changed the type of character delivering the monologue, or used the monologue in a way in which it never was intended. Meanwhile, the freshmen remained with their teacher to read the play before meeting with the seniors from my class.

For the first four days of the project, my seniors met with one of the five teachers (the four from the Cross Curricular Connections program and me) and one-fifth of the freshmen in five

different locations. Therefore, I only saw the group of my seniors that was with me; the others I did not see until the fifth day of the project. On the first day of the project, my students showed the freshmen how to select, prepare, and deliver a monologue from the text and then to write an adapted monologue. My students created a hand-out with specific suggestions to help the freshmen as they selected, prepared, and performed their monologues. They then demonstrated their monologues to the freshmen and assisted the freshmen in selecting their monologues. On the second day, the seniors led the freshmen through an extended rehearsal of their monologues—first alone, then with a partner, and then each student presented the pair of monologues to a small group of seven or eight, each monitored by a senior. The freshmen were encouraged to help each other with specific feedback to improve the monologues. During the third and fourth days, the seniors watched the freshmen perform their monologues and wrote their comments and suggestions to the freshmen about their performances. On the fifth day, all 130 of us were together, and my students assisted in directing the main activity for the day, a group question-and-answer activity to review the play.

A project such as this demands a great deal of faith in the students, especially since my students were sent to four different freshmen classes during our regular class time, and I did not even see them for four days. Of course, the students and I planned the activities ahead of time and a teacher supervised each class, but the students developed the activities, wrote the directions, carried out the instruction, and assisted the freshmen. The feedback I received from the four Cross Curricular Connections instructors about my seniors was gratifying. They praised the work of the seniors in leading the freshmen. The maturity and patience of the seniors in dealing with the questions and uncertainties of the freshmen were singled out as especially noteworthy. Perhaps one of the freshmen put it best: "In preparing for our

monologues the seniors assigned to my class were awesome. They were a great help by directing us and giving us many options for the presentation. I looked to them as peers helping me make my monologue the best it could be."

Conclusion

Putting more faith in the students is not without risk, but the risk is worth it. Occasionally, some students do not accept the responsibility and a project or activity fizzles, but that is the exception. More importantly, as they become more active participants in their education, they will learn more and will believe they can learn more. No longer will they be bystanders in their own education; through their active involvement they learn to take responsibility for their own education—something too often missing from our classrooms. Moreover, involving students in these ways makes it easier for students and teachers to become partners in learning. Teachers and students learn to work together better and share learning. Isn't that what learning is all about?

I'll admit that at times, administrators get nervous about the students "running the show." At other times, colleagues view putting more faith in the kids as taking the easy way out. To view more active involvement in classroom matters on the part of our students as taking the easy way out is patently false because it fails to take into account the time spent in careful planning by the teacher and the students. Moreover, seeing active student involvement as the easy way out misses the point entirely. Fortunately, colleagues have given me ideas about the kinds of activities I can expect kids to do successfully. However, most of the ideas have come from the students themselves. Whereas I was once unsure about trusting students in this way, now I know that as I learn more ways to give students ownership, they will continue to justify my faith. I owe them thanks for showing me the way. By their acceptance and enthusiastic involvement they have proven to me that you gotta have faith.