1996

My Summer Vacation or How I Realized I Was A Drip in the Classroom

Nancy G. Patterson

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

Recommended Citation

Patterson, Nancy G. (1996) "My Summer Vacation or How I Realized I Was A Drip in the Classroom,"
Language Arts Journal of Michigan: Vol. 12: Iss. 2, Article 9.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1484>

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.

My Summer Vacation or How I Realized I Was A Drip in the Classroom

Nancy G. Patterson

I know what you're going to say. And you're right. I knew better. I mean, I did pay attention in my English methods class, for heaven's sake. But I was so thrilled to actually get a job teaching English that I sort of forgot everything I learned. OK. So I didn't really forget. It's just that they handed me this grammar book and I figured teaching parts of speech and diagramming sentences was still cool in school. I mean, everybody was doing it. Well, everybody at my school. Well, almost everybody.

OK. I was gutless. I stuck to the same old, same old because I was a rookie and didn't want to make waves. And then I sort of got stuck in this rut. For the next 14 years. Yeah, yeah. I knew what the research said. I mean, I hadn't actually read the research. I hadn't even read an article about the research. I had just heard that teaching parts of speech and all that crap was pretty senseless. Gimme a break. It was 1974.

So, why did I make my ninth graders keep a (gasp) grammar notebook? Why did I make them diagram sentences and memorize the 48 commonly used prepositions in alphabetical order?

I have no idea.

The only reason I can think of now, in my far more enlightened present, is that I didn't know what else to do with the little snots. We did some writing, of course. We didn't use the writing process, but I prided myself in getting the kids to

write all kinds of things and patted myself on the back for being really creative. But the fact was, everything was pretty boring. Including the blue reading anthologies the kids used. The ones bought in 1965 that had out-dated pictures of kids in dorky clothes and an ultra-sanitized version of *Romeo and Juliet* with all the nurse's dirty speeches taken out.

So, in other words, I made kids suffer through the same kind of boring English-y junk I had to suffer through when I was a kid.

Then I got transferred to the middle school.

Hormone heaven.

Rudeness plus.

Rambunctiousness personified.

I was in trouble.

But rather than change I became a strict disciplinarian. That held things together for a couple of years. Kinda.

Then one day as I was leaving the teachers' lounge I groaned to no one in particular that I had to go teach eighth graders about nouns. Suddenly our hot-shot math teacher, the one who was getting her Ph.D., the one who was famous all over the country for being a hot-shot math teacher said, "Judas Priest! You mean to tell me my daughter has to get more of that flipping crap when she gets here!" Actually she used much stronger language than this, but I figured the editors would have apoplexy, so you can insert

whatever expletives you want. You'd probably be pretty close.

Anyway, the hot-shot math teacher started me thinking. Really thinking. I'd been using some Power Writing techniques, but I was beginning to get the idea that Power Writing wasn't really where it was at. And it was pretty boring having to read all those 1 2 3 2 3 paragraphs.

So, that summer I went to a week-long writing workshop in Traverse City.

Holy Smokes!

Right there in Traverse City, Michigan, I became a writer. A WRITER! I wrote a short story that everybody loved. I got so much praise, and I felt so good, I don't think the tires touched the pavement all the way home from Traverse City. I inflicted my story on every friend I ever had. And they remained my friends. I called my mother in Phoenix and read the story to her. And she didn't disown me. I sent the story to a bunch of publishers and got some really good rejection slips. One editor told me to turn the short story into a novel and call her. Call her! There was even a phone number!

Life was good.

So I found myself wondering. Golly, if writing and sharing and writing some more and sharing and writing and going public was so wonderful for me, couldn't it be that wonderful for middle school kids, too? Or any kids, for that matter?

Thus began a wonderful rollercoaster journey to a student-centered language arts classroom where kids became real writers and real readers, real listeners and real speakers. Where kids had lots of choices about what they read and wrote about. Where kids kept response journals rather than grammar notebooks. Where kids used language instead of labeling it. Where they created their own meaning instead of letting someone else's wash over them like baffled ripples of luke-warm dishwater.

It wasn't easy, let me tell you. I'm one of those jump-in-before-you-have-all-the-details-sorted-out kind of people. So I had a lot of kids and parents angry with me for a little while because none of us knew what the expectations were

supposed to be. But I more or less figured stuff out with the help of Nancie Atwell, Linda Rief, Tom Romano, and Lucy Calkins. Plus, my principal backed me all the way.

And you know what? After seven years of taking classes and reading a zillion books about learning and writing, I still don't have it all figured out. But that's OK. Nobody does.

That one week at the Traverse Bay Teaching Workshop with Mike Steinberg, Ruth Nathan, Gloria Nixon-John, Alan Weber, Paul Wolbrink and all the others changed my life. I joined Peninsula Writers. I got my master's degree. I helped start a writing project in Ionia County. I participated in the Red Cedar Writing Project at MSU. And I just finished the first year of a doctoral program while teaching full time. Neat, huh. You see, I'm a creator of text. A worker with words. A writer.

And you know what? Those rude, crude, lewd, stewed-in-junk-food middle school kids? The ones with more hormones than sense? They've come along very nicely. They've won writing contests, and gotten their stuff published, and shown their mommies their wonderful stories about zombies taking over the world. They've struggled with I-Searches so much they claimed they'd puke if they didn't finish them that day. And they've labored over poems so hard they thought their innards would spill out all over the floor. And they've wrestled with short stories for so many hours they swore they'd die if they ever wrote another one—until the next idea knocked them over the head.

So, what have I learned in all this? Well, I've learned that kids can work a lot harder than I ever thought they could. I've learned that experience is the best teacher, and all the drill and kill in the world won't make them better creators and consumers of text. I've learned that people acquire literacy in much the same way they acquire language—through immersing themselves in an environment rich in text and talk.

And I've learned something else. I've learned that my kids and I have something in common.

You see. They're writers, too.