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Nancie Atwell I'm Not!

Pam Nagy

Several years ago, I was lamenting to colleagues that I really did not know what to do about writing in my middle school classroom. Grammar and grammar exercises certainly did not create better writers of my students. For some reason, the students never remembered about nouns, verbs, subject—verb agreement, etc. no matter how much I drilled them. The students were not enamored of my “creative writing” exercises either. What could I do to make Language Arts “stick” with my students?

A particularly wonderful colleague and friend suggested that I read Nancie Atwell's *In The Middle*. I read that book from front to back and was ignited by Atwell's successes with her eighth grade students in Maine. I wanted to emulate Atwell's kind of writing process in my middle school language arts classes. My previous dismal success with writing made me desperate for ideas and inspiration. *In The Middle* offered sensible and student-centered ideas. As I read the book, I thought to myself, “I can do mini-lessons. I can do the status of the class report. I can do this!”

I wanted my students to write for themselves, expressing their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. I wanted to see my students enjoy writing and experience the warmth of peer response. I wanted my students to experiment with the different genre and possibly discover themselves to be poets or journalists. I envisioned my students

becoming critics, willing to edit and revise their writing because they wanted it to become their personal best. I wanted them to be proud of what they had created and not shove papers into wastebaskets, lockers, desks, and under their beds.

I bought a spiral notebook for each child and put it into a hanging file folder in those large colorful plastic tubs. In class, I talked about the spiral notebooks and what the students would create using paper and pencil. I talked about using their ideas to generate writing. I talked about brainstorming, story mapping, characters, revising, editing, sharing with peers. I was doing my Nancie Atwell impression.

Reality set in very early when I realized my students did not have even the most remote idea of what I was modeling and talking about. They said they had nothing to say on their own. However, they would be willing to respond to teacher-directed topics. No matter what I did to develop ideas or brainstorm, I could not get my students to write more than five or six lines. Their papers were filled with a million mistakes. Forget coherence or sequence. My students were more worried about whether they had written “enough lines” to get an A. That's when I began asking questions about my students' past writing experiences. I borrowed from Atwell again, this time using her

example of a writing survey. My survey was simple with only a few questions:

*** What kinds of writing have you done in the past?**

- penmanship; workbook pages; grammar sentences; spelling sentences; I don't do writing.

*** How do you think your teacher judges your writing?**

- if it is neat; has good spelling; has capital letters; question marks and periods; indent each paragraph.

*** Where have you done writing before this year?**

- in English classes; in school; nowhere; we didn't do writing.

*** Why do you write?**

- because my teacher makes me; to get the grade; to do the assignment; because I'm supposed to.

*** Do you like to write?**

- no; sometimes; I hate it; it's dumb.

*** When you revise your writing, what do you do?**

- make it neater; correct the mistakes my teacher tells me; do it over.

What a shock to discover that my students had little or no previous exposure to process writing. Worse yet, when I said the word "write," they did not know what I meant. I frantically went back to *In The Middle*. Nancie Atwell didn't seem to have this kind of problem. What was the matter with me? Obviously, I wasn't Nancie Atwell.

I discovered something that I had missed in my first reading of that book; Atwell's students came to her class twice!! Can you imagine each student having one hour for reading instruction and another hour just for writing. These students had **two hours** of language arts instruction. Her average class size was twenty-five. That **was** a shocker.

Also, her students were fortunate to attend school where they practiced process writing in all grades. Atwell was building upon a very strong foundation.

My classroom situation in no way resembled Nancie Atwell's. First, I did not have the luxury of

having a class for reading and then having that class another hour for writing. I taught reading and writing in one fifty-four minute period. Second, instead of having twenty-five students in my class, I had anywhere from thirty-two to thirty-seven students each hour. But the biggest difference was that my students had not used process writing consistently from kindergarten to middle school.

It has now been six years since I first read *In The Middle*. The responses to the student writing surveys are always very like what I received that first year. Each school year I begin writing at the same place with students who have had little consistent writing instruction. My goals are usually similar each year: to take my students as far through the writing process as possible. I always want to be able to do it all. By the end of the school year I am exhausted from the paper load of four different classes. My airport luggage carrier is permanently attached to my hand. I wind up feeling that the students did not go as far as they could. I worry that I spent too much time in one area of writing and not enough elsewhere. I ask myself, "Have I cheated the kids because I didn't emphasize different genres enough? Have I spent too much time helping students respond to literature? Maybe if I had pushed a little harder my students would have been more willing to revise their pieces. What if I haven't responded to their writing in the right way?" Furthermore, I worry that next year's teacher will think I did not teach them anything. Or what if the next teacher does not value writing? My students might lose what little they gained.

I keep reminding myself that middle school students have hormones that are running amok and taking them all along for the ride. It is difficult being a teenager in these times and doubly so in the inner city with all the problems of economics, gangs, teen pregnancies, etc. On top of the hormones, engaging students in the writing process when they have had so little practice is incredibly hard. Students who are unfamiliar with the writing process do not become proficient writers in a semester. In fact, they often do not develop proficiency for several years or even become proficient at all. Frankly, it becomes downright dishearten-

ing and discouraging. They are at an age where their county district counterparts are surpassing them dramatically in reading and writing. Those statistics are thrust into the public's eye when the MEAP scores are published.

Given the information from the writing surveys, my usual action plan is to begin each school year with daily journal writing. I want to build **fluency** here. I either begin or end the class period with journals. I encourage students to write about whatever they choose. For those students who "don't have anything to write," I provide a variety of topics most often revolving around what the class is reading. I do give grades based on the number of times a student wrote in his journal over a designated period. Even if a student is absent, the journal entries must be completed.

One year, a goal for an eighth grade class was to stop the cry, "How many lines do I have to write?" By the end of the first twenty weeks, if someone in that class asked about length, most of the class responded with, "However long it takes to say what you mean." Reflecting back I can see that I should have considered that class to be one of my teaching successes. They did stop asking about length, and they did become more comfortable with writing. The majority of their journal responses became longer and more meaningful. However, I wanted to take that class (and others) much further. I wanted to get past journals and into writing for an audience other than themselves and their friends or to get an A. My students never seem to get past this point.

Along with the journals, I ask my students to participate in a variety of activities that link their reading and writing. Over the years, students have written and performed commercials for stories or books. They have designed book covers, illustrated key points in novels, re-written story endings, written to authors, pretended to be a favorite character, etc. I enjoy watching students become involved in these various activities, and it amazes me where they go in the process. Still, it bothers me that my students willingly participate in these activities because they are "fun" and not because they are using writing. I would like to see

students who write and write and then write some more.

This last year one of my eighth grade classes decided to write and produce a "talk show" that interviewed story characters from Mildred D. Taylor's *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. However, this class wanted to bring the characters away from the 1930s and into the late 1960s so the play could address the issue of civil rights. They did a wonderful job; the acting was realistic; the historical aspects were relatively accurate; everyone enjoyed his or her part. Their teacher was the only one unhappy. I wanted my students to brainstorm, to rough draft, and to rewrite the script. That didn't happen. This "talk show" was mostly ad-lib. Oh, the students knew where they wanted to go, and they did write down the history to be included for the sake of accuracy. But, when I used the words **Brainstorm**, **Rough Draft**, and **Rewrite**, my class looked as if they were still learning a foreign language.

Brainstorm, **Rough Draft**, and **Rewrite** are terms that I use constantly. They are on the wall or chalkboard. Whenever we write as a group, we go through the process, and I am thinking aloud the whole time. The students are cooperative because I demand it, but to them these are "just writing exercises" their teacher grades. They have not been writing long enough to habitually think of brainstorming, rough drafting, or even eventual publication of their writing. These steps take time, practice, and application. Most of my students have not had the practice nor the application of the writing process.

To be truthful, I have never been able to systematically get students to the point of using revision strategies. Once they have written a piece, they are done, finished, it's over! They might rewrite one time provided that I make the corrections. This happens year after year. If my students had had consistent practice with process writing before middle school, they might have internalized the process.

Notice that I said **consistent** practice with process writing. Our school district is very large, and it is an overwhelming task to coordinate the K-12 Language Arts curriculum. I believe that the district wants the best instruction possible for all

children, but monitoring this instruction is difficult. Ask the teachers, and they will emphatically state that students write in their classes. But what kinds of writing and how often are not known.

This year my seventh grade classes seemed more eager and better prepared to write than any students I have previously taught. Toward the last few hot humid days of school, my 7th graders were working on writing related to science fiction author Anne McCaffrey's short story, *The Smallest Dragonboy*. As a class, we had agreed that this particular day was to be a day of sharing what they had written so far. As I prepared to begin, there came a squeaky seventh grade male voice from the back of the room, "Ah, Ms. Nagy, are we

going to peer edit this story or are we conferencing one-on-one with you?" I quickly closed my mouth and said thank-you silently to that unknown teacher in this child's past.

I know that I have some good pieces of writing coming out of my classes even if it is not the caliber of writing that I saw in Atwell's book. A wise man once said, "Stop beating yourself up and do what you can." (Thanks, Fred.) I know that I should not even compare my students' writing to Atwell's students, but I decided six years ago that what was happening in Maine could happen in my classes. We are not there yet, but I am working on it, and so are the students and other teachers in my district.