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Celebration of Writing

Diana Wakeford

Most Language Arts teachers have at one time or another been frustrated at the blasé, lack of interest students show in revising their compositions, their disinterest in correctness, and their lack of passion for one of our passions—writing. I've found at least a partial cure in an event I first experienced in a Reading/Writing Workshop at M.S.U. facilitated by Stephen Tchudi and Marilyn Wilson. It's called The Celebration of Writing. It was such a moving experience for all of the graduate students involved, I decided to try it with my students. You might ask, and rightly so, how does a teacher get students to celebrate writing, a too often painful process with questionable results, not high on their list of priorities. Following is the way we have gone about it at Tecumseh High School, a school of 950 students, ninth-twelfth grades, in a small community in southeastern Michigan.

What is a Celebration of Writing?

It is an exhibit of illustrated student writing for the purpose of inviting fellow students, faculty, parents, school board members, and the community to read and respond to student work, thus providing an expansive "real" audience.

Where and when is it held?

We hold ours in the school library because it underscores our purpose for being there—TO READ—and puts our student writers in the com-

pany of other great authors. Recently we have considered the gym as our exhibit expands, but we put up with the close quarters for the atmosphere.

We schedule it ahead and warn fellow teachers that the library will be closed to class use for two days. The first year we held it for only one day during school hours and two hours in the evening, but students complained of not having enough time to read all the displays, so we expanded it to Thursday and Friday during school hours and two-three hours both evenings. Ours is usually the third week in May because it is in conjunction with my finals, but any time of the year would do.

Who Participates?

Our Celebration is open to students from all grades, but most often it is juniors and seniors who participate, partly because the spring semester of our junior and senior English classes has a reading/writing workshop format. Participation is different depending on the teachers and how involved they choose to be. For my students, their Celebration of Writing project is created as part of their final exam. Some teachers give extra credit. Others give substantial credit for the nine weeks grade. Still others ask students to select works they have done during the year some time and just do the visual with no credit but experience. A

few teachers choose not to participate at all. One year we even had the French classes participate, writing in French with translations!

What are the Criteria for Participation?

Students are invited to create an original piece of writing suitable in subject and language for a public audience of all ages. The subject and genre are open within the previous limits. Students are encouraged to write about something they know, feel strongly about, or have experienced, not necessarily in a personal essay form but using that knowledge as a basis for a series of poems, background to make a short story realistic, steps to a how-to booklet, ideas for a children's book, a cartoon, a satire or a travel brochure, among others. Students may, of course, use any research they choose to augment their pieces, giving credit where due, or delve into their imaginations for any number of other possibilities.

Because of the nature of the exhibit and the number of displays, the writings should be a suitable length to be read in a relatively short time. Usually one to five typed pages works well. If a student's writing develops into something longer than this, I encourage an excerpt to gain people's attention, with the longer piece alongside for those with more time or interest.

Writings must be typed or done in calligraphy, must be correct, and must have an audio-visual component that extends the meaning of the writing and attracts the reader.

Audio-visual Component

The audio-visual component adds interest to the exhibit and a new dimension to the writing. I usually make the following suggestions:

Visuals should extend the meaning of the writing and catch the reader's attention.

Consider the use of multiple dimensions or a display of actual objects rather than just a poster board with some pictures and writing. In any case, aim at stunning simplicity, originality, and variety. Make good use of color to augment mood. Don't lose the writing in visuals that are too busy or too obtrusive. Strive for unity of the writing and visual. For example, a student writing about a

favorite tree where she used to sit to think and escape the world made a large model of a tree and put her writing on the leaves. Another writing about a romance gone wrong, was set up as a cozy restaurant scene with dead roses in a vase and the actual writing in menus: the poem about the budding romance in the wine list, the developing romance in the main menu, and the afterthoughts in the dessert menu. A young man writing about how football had affected his high school years created a display of football paraphernalia, put his main writing inside the program, and wrote a companion poem on the football. Still another student writing about how people don't always reflect who they really are wrote his poem on a mirror. A girl writing about an accident she had running into a mailbox brought in a mailbox and wrote the writing on the post. We have had a few live displays like a Siamese fighting fish and a turtle, but I couldn't allow a cage of rather aggressive fighting cocks, outfitted in their combat gear, because they were dangerous, not to mention illegal.

If students want to use photographs, I encourage them to frame them in some way and be certain they have duplicates. For those who want to bring in irreplaceable or valuable objects, I encourage them to bring in substitutes, like an inexpensive china doll to symbolize an heirloom doll, or a locked display case to display sports medals, or copies of letters from universities recruiting athletes rather than the originals. In ten years of the exhibit, we have had very few casualties.

Every year some students say they aren't "creative" and can't do this part, but with a few ideas and encouragement, they always come through. I also allow students to ask an artistic friend to illustrate the writing for them under two conditions: one is that the writer describe the image she has in her head to the artist and ask him to execute it, rather than give the artist the piece of writing and let him do all the work of visualizing and creating the illustration; two is to give the artist appropriate credit. It always winds up being an interesting exercise in communication.

Some students make tapes to accompany their displays. These are used with earphones and instructions for rewinding the tape etc. We prefer the tapes to be people reading or singing their pieces rather than just background music.

Every year students ask if they can use videos as their audio-visual component. We have banned them for the moment because in our experience we found that students, especially, tended to watch the videos over and over to the exclusion of reading the writing presented. There is value in the video approach but we feel it needs to be set up in an adjoining room or in a place that won't be distracting readers. There is probably a place, also, for oral reading of some of the pieces but we haven't been able to engineer that yet.

Each year I take slides and photos of the displays to use as examples the following year, to help students as they are thinking of ideas to write about and how to illustrate their writing.

Writing Process

The process my students go through to develop their Celebration of Writing project is as follows:

Students are told at the beginning of the second semester that they will be required to do a project for the Celebration as part of their final exam so they can start thinking about it. For us this is enough because most of the participating students have been to a Celebration of Writing previously and have an idea what it is all about.

They are given approximately three weeks to complete the project with in- and out-of-class time. There are several steps I ask them to do and we adjust or substitute as necessary. There are ideal due dates for each step, and the final project isn't accepted unless all the steps are completed. I keep track of steps completed on a checklist, with check marks for steps turned in on time and circled check marks for steps turned in late.

The first steps involve brainstorming and scrambling for a subject. The steps include a list of six possible ideas to write about, a choice of two of these ideas matched up with possible forms to write them in, a one page freewrite about each of the two, an extension of the one that seems to be

working best, a combination of the two or another freewrite on a new topic.

Then they do three experiments. This is where most often real revision takes place. Each must be at least a page long so the writers get a feel for the experiment. All are required to do a Zoom Lens which involves taking one sentence out of the draft and using sensory imagery to develop it into a full page of detail. They then have a choice of two other experiments to try, selecting from a change in point of view, a change in form, or retelling part of what they have written in conversation.

Then they get into peer response groups to read their drafts and experiments aloud and get written and oral feedback on what is working about their papers, parts that need to be clarified, questions that need to be answered, suggestions for how to incorporate one or more of their experiments, and help with ideas for the audio-visual component.

Next, students are asked to work at least parts of their experiments into their main paper. Often they find they like one of the experiments better than the original draft, and the paper takes a new direction. At this point they are asked to type up a computer draft, and it is given to the teacher to read. I typically ask questions, point out what is working, and encourage. Then, I have a conference with each student to discuss the paper so far and trouble shoot. Next, students are asked to sketch their visual, showing how the actual writing will be incorporated, and discuss it with me.

Sometime during the process students are asked to read for an hour in the genre in which they are writing, taking a page of notes on what they noticed about how the writing was organized, stylistic devices that were used, how illustrations or diagrams were incorporated, level of vocabulary, use of introductions, conclusions, transitions, etc. They also include a bibliography of what they read.

The Friday before the week of the exhibit, their final, edited, correct papers are due so I have time to double check them for appropriateness and correctness, and so that last-minute corrections can be made without pressure before the exhibit. At this point I again stress the importance of

correctness and remind students that each piece of writing in the exhibit is a representative of teen writing in the school, so each student has the responsibility to do his or her best job. Most importantly, students want to be correct because they care about their subjects and their audience.

Monday of the exhibit week the visuals are due with the writing presented as it will be in the Celebration. The only parts of visuals that don't have to be in that day are live flowers or helium balloons or anything that will self destruct before set-up on Wednesday. This gives us two cushion days to trouble shoot if necessary, saves last minute panic, and prevents inappropriate surprises from getting into the exhibit.

The last thing each student writes is a brief biography card to be attached to the project including information about his or her interests and plans for the future, and any comments each wishes to make about the writing. Sometimes they include a photograph. Their full names must be on the front of the projects for them to be put in the exhibit. I want them to take responsibility for their writing, as well as take the credit for a job well done.

After the exhibit, students turn in all their drafts and steps with a check sheet and write a self-evaluation based on effort, creativity, correctness, process, evidence of growth, unity of writing and visual, and productive use of class time. They grade themselves on each, giving reasons for their choice of grade. They are also asked to describe all the steps they took to complete the project, problems they ran into, how they solved them, and advice they would give themselves in preparing another project, to encourage meta-cognitive reflection.

In ten years, some form of this process has rarely failed to help a student develop a very respectable project of which the student is most proud. It has worked for all levels of abilities as well.

Publicity

If time permits, a showcase of pictures from previous years is put up to get everyone at school interested and in the mood.

Notices are put in school newsletters and bulletins.

A student or group of students designs a poster, runs off multiple copies, and puts them up around the school and around town.

Local newspapers are contacted about the upcoming event and given information about it or a student writes up the information to give to the paper before it happens. We also ask for a reporter to come and cover the event and usually wind up with some good coverage after the fact.

Letters are written and sent to Board of Education members, administrators, fellow teachers, and parents of participating students inviting them to come and read with us.

Set Up

Set up is usually last hour and after school on the day before the exhibit and before school the first day of the exhibit.

My last hour class usually washes all the library tables and transports and sets up the hinged display boards we borrow from the art department. They are made of painted 4' by 8' fiber board, hinged and framed to stand up. They are a little high for our purposes, but they are free. The display boards are set up around the perimeter of the library covering book shelves. Tables are arranged in the center of the room to allow for a free flow of traffic. Dispersed among the tables, we arrange some hollow wooden doors we found for \$10 apiece at a seconds place. We hinged two to three doors together so we could place them at angles to stand up safely. They work well because they are inexpensive, fairly easily stored and a good height for reading.

I always have a supply of stick pins, duct tape, a staple gun, tape, white out, etc. for student use as they set up. Then right after school, the fun begins. Students are responsible for setting up and taking down their own displays. It's first come, first served for a spot. In an hour, about two-thirds of the displays are set up and the exhibit takes shape. The rest of the projects are put up the following morning before school.

In some schools the teachers put up and take down displays and filter all comments, which may result in a more nearly perfect, professional look-

ing display, but it's also so much more work for us and the students lose ownership.

The Exhibit During the Day

English classes, special education classes, and other classes by request are scheduled to come down during their class hours. Sometimes middle school students ask to come as well. My classes go both days because someone needs to oversee, and they don't hire a sub for me. The first day they read. The second they evaluate their own total projects and do a sample judging of the exhibit as a whole, selecting the most humorous, the most touching, and the best visual, giving reasons why and pointing out positive aspects of the Celebration and suggesting improvements for the following year. We never award prizes. The idea is for all participants to feel like winners.

All visitors to the exhibit are encouraged to give away Excellent Writing Awards, which are copied paper ribbons with a space for comments and a signature. These are left in an envelope by the writer's project. For most of the participants this is the best part of the exhibit. Some people enjoy reading the comments as much as the projects. Teachers remind students of the importance of writing specific, positive comments, and we spot check, when possible, for inappropriate comments.

The Evening Exhibit

In the evening we dress it up a little for the public. One year we had a brass quintet playing in the background as people read. Most often we play background music and have punch and cookies for visitors to enjoy while browsing through the exhibits. Sometimes students bring the cookies; other times we order them from the cafeteria if the English budget allows. Except for the original expense of the display doors our budget for the Celebration is rarely over \$50. Participating teachers take turns greeting parents, encouraging them to give out Excellent Writing Awards and comments, and assuring them how much the students appreciate hearing from adult readers.

Special things happen in these evening readings. First, it is great positive public relations for

teenagers. Many parents haven't read one of their children's papers since elementary school and are very impressed with the depth of the writing, the emotion revealed, the skills the students have developed, and the subjects they choose to write about. Many parents start around the exhibit very hesitantly figuring on reading their own teen's work and maybe those of some of their child's friends, but become engrossed and leave two hours later very moved by what they have read.

One year a senior did a memory piece about one of his classmates who should have been graduating but had died of leukemia in the sixth grade. The evening of the exhibit his parents came to read the piece because someone had told them about it. As it turned out, it would have been their child's birthday that night, and they were thrilled that someone else had remembered. They asked the boy for a copy, and he was very proud to give it to them. In another similar incident, a girl wrote about a friend of hers who had died in a car accident that year. The mother upon reading it asked the girl for a copy, and they developed a very special relationship and helped each other through the grieving process. Many have written tributes to a parent who comes that night to the wonderful surprise. An elementary teacher who had struggled to help one student begin to write in third grade was most impressed with the growth the student had made, something we, as teachers, too rarely get to see.

Take Down

Even though students are also responsible for taking down their displays, we always have about a third that aren't picked up because of games or conflicting activities. So we schedule a clean-up crew, consisting of students who need to make up detentions or need extra credit. We take down all the remaining displays and stack them on tables by teacher's name. Then we take them up to that teacher's room to be picked up by their students the following Monday. Display boards are returned to the art room and other storage areas. The janitor cleans the tables and puts them back in order. It rarely takes more than an hour or hour and a half if there are five to ten students to help.

Follow Up

I heap praise and flowers on the librarians for their cooperation and patience during the whole process. Thank-you notes and cookies go to the janitor, high school secretary, and art teacher for their contributions. Most importantly, I share with the students the comments I have heard during the two days and congratulate them on a job exquisitely done.

Raw Beginnings

Remember this scenario reflects 10 years of developing this process. We started small. In fact, the first year, my insecurity led me to do the Celebration one day for just my own classes on tables in the library, with no budget, and it was so wonderful and the students were so enthused it kept growing. At first I had trouble convincing other teachers to participate, but eventually they

came on board. I just kept inviting them and their classes to come and read with us and offering assistance. It worked. I have shared this idea with many, and it has been done successfully at elementary and middle school, as well as other high schools, with modifications to fit each individual school.

Student Comments

Students like the Celebration of Writing because they get a chance to write creatively about a subject of their choice for an audience of peers and others they care about. They learn about themselves and others from new perspectives; get help from each other and teachers to develop their best writing; feel a sense of accomplishment; and most importantly, feel readers have listened to them in new ways.