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Even I Needed to be Reminded

Rebecca Sanchez

"Since the beginning of the year," wrote Chris, "I've opened up to words. For the first time, I don't feel like I'm at the bottom of the barrel." I leafed through Chris' in-class journal, savoring his imagery and wondering how he could have seen himself at the bottom of the barrel.

I constantly encourage the language within to emerge, urging students to experiment with words in their in-class journals as they look at the world around them with the eyes of language. Typically, we might turn to the weather outside the classroom windows and jot down images. Later every student contributes one image to make a class poem for display. Or we may use guided imagery to get us into the home of the character in the short story we are reading. Sometimes we consider an event in a story and brainstorm metaphors for the event in order to see it in a newer, deeper way.

During the first week of school, the students and I spend time talking about words and what words can do. We put up a long sheet of newsprint and begin to collect words that jump out at us in our reading, in conversation, and in writing. After checking the spelling and pronunciation of the words, students share them with the class and explain what drew them to those words. Before recording the words on the newsprint, students ask the class to repeat them and to tap into their magic. Initially, students comment that these

words are fun to say, but later words such as *stalk* and *stride* replace *walk* in their descriptive writing; I notice *derogatory*, *engulfed*, and *taciturn* creeping into their discussions. Recently, I observed that the writing generated by my general English classes, which include several learning disabled students, had improved greatly as to word play, imagery, metaphors, realistic dialogue, strong verbs, and interesting words. In less than a term, the students had demonstrated an eagerness to pull up the words and phrases out of an internal storehouse of words.

I reflected upon the many in-class activities we had done and felt sure that they had been effective; after all, the students demonstrated a wordsmithing that was all but absent at the beginning of the school year. I was certain the students would indicate their favorite writing activities and explain why they worked for them. In fact, so confident was I that my activities to generate images were responsible for the growth in their writing, that I envisioned myself writing about those activities some day. To check my intuition, I asked the students to reflect in their journals upon their internal river of language and the activities that encouraged them to grow as writers.

After the class devoted to this writing prompt, I smugly opened their journals, prepared to read affirmations of our many in-class language activi-

ties. Would it be the class poem on rain or the collaborative poetry about autumn as the all-round favorite? Or would they tell me that my underlining examples of effective language in their journals really helped unleash the language within?

I began with Babette's journal. She wrote, "I found the language within when I realized that I wasn't going to get in trouble for misspelled words. To me that was great." Babette, learning disabled in language arts, had demonstrated an increase in fluency in her journal responses, abandoning short sentences built with "safe" words to experiment with a new vocabulary and different sentence constructions.

Buddy's words in his journal echoed Babette's:

I'm a terrible speller so I never wrote much before and writing was always hard work. Now because I can fix my spelling later, I like to do a lot of different things with words. Sometimes I even combine two words together to make a new one.

Again and again, I found references to freedom from worrying about spelling as essential to unleashing the language within. As a Penn Rivers Writing Project Fellow, I had experienced that freedom, but somehow in the midst of my teaching, I had forgotten how exhilarating such a feeling could be.

I read on to find many students commenting on audience. Amy explained, "I found the language within when I realized that only you were going to read my journal." Becky wrote about audience as well, "When I knew that no one else would read my journal but you, I began to experiment with language." She further explained, "Also I am allowed to express my feelings and thoughts in my journal. That makes the language come to me."

I read on avidly, forgetting about my well-honed in-class activities. These students knew what worked, and they were reminding me of how important the climate of trust is. Without this, none of the growth would have been possible.

"Writing what I feel strongly about," explained Dave, "taps into my personal language river. I pick the strongest words out of that river now, the most powerful tones in my soul." His classmate,

Jake, affirmed this. "The language comes to me when I write about things that I know about."

The daily journaling, even through the literature, came back to me. We had connected personally to the text. Given a prompt to run with, the students had bent the prompt into personal connections again and again. Sherri confided to me, "I know what happened to me and my friends. Mrs. Sanchez made us write in our journals a lot. That made everyone think of topics to write about." Her response partner, Christine, a learning disabled student, concurred, "Writing in the journal made me find the language inside myself. It gets my brain thinking for future papers."

Often I read my papers aloud to the students to give them ideas; I always journal with them and share my entries. Sometimes they sit, staring at me with the sleep still in their faces. More than once I have wondered if I should share what I write with them. Did it make a difference at eight o'clock in the morning? According to Missy, it did:

Several things brought out the words in me. I trust you, the teacher and my reader, and I like to read powerful stuff. Since I trust you, I try to write powerful stuff for you to read. I have also learned from listening to you read your writing to us. I like your images.

I closed Missy's journal and reflected. Just that morning I had read my writing to her class. I had nearly been impatient with myself to finish reading so we could move on to the activity for the day. I apparently needed to be reminded of the one basic element which nurtures writers and their language: the creation of an atmosphere of trust between the teacher and the students and among students. According to the students, my classroom offered a comfort zone for budding writers to experiment, to think of topics, to take risks with words, and to share their pieces with each other and with me.

This atmosphere made all else possible; collaborative poetry, image banks on the board, and words-we-love on the newsprint would not thrive in a classroom where the red pen ruled and the silence of worksheets covered the class like a blanket.

Students, such as Sabrina, remembered that kind of classroom and reduced it to a dim echo:

What unleashed me was playing with language like making comparisons. That gave me the freedom to write what I wanted and how I wanted. I felt like a haunting memory had vanished and that I could give my best possible. I wanted to earn your trust in me as a writer because I trusted you as my reader.

Humbled by the basics, eloquently reminded by my students who had so recently found the words to tell their stories, I took stock. Clearly, the atmosphere of trust the students and I had nurtured the first weeks of school in turn established us as writers and responders. Although my activities to tap into language produced results, the atmosphere of trust made the activities work. Two journals to go. I opened Angie's and read her words.

Since the beginning of my schooling in this subject called English, I've always had grammar—nothing but adjectives, verbs, pronouns, etc. So when I came to your class, I was surprised. I could express myself. I've had a secret place of expression tucked away for years like a garden long forgotten. Now I can use the poetry that's been growing there. Thank you.

Christopher also wrote to me about a first in his writing experience—using effective language outside my classroom:

Now in letters and poems I write to girls I use words I never heard of or used before this year. Thanks! The girls really like my poems. One girl asked me where I get my words. I told her I get them in English class where I can open up on paper.

By the end of the first quarter, the secret places had grown on paper, the words unfolding and branching out into poems, lyrical journal writes, and personal papers packed with movie action verbs and photographic description. Those once forgotten gardens now flourished in journals when student writers knew who their audience was, when they trusted me as a writer and a reader, when I shared my writing with them, when they had opportunities to choose their own topics, and when mechanical correctness took a back seat to fluency. As a classroom teacher of sixteen years and a Penn Rivers Writing Project Fellow and assistant instructor, even I needed to be reminded of what I already knew.