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Tearing Down the Walls: Building a Community of Learners

Laura Schiller

"We have shared experiences ... and I feel I know him better as a writer, a person, and a son." Sterling Russell about her son, Marcus

I knew how empowering writing could be. I knew how close I felt to my peers when we shared our drafts, risking our self-esteem as we disclosed ourselves on paper. I knew the intense personal satisfaction of struggling to construct knowledge by talking, reading, and writing with my colleagues. And I wanted more than anything for my students to feel that same love of learning.

I set out to create the same environment in my classroom that fostered my own learning.

I set out to create the same environment in my classroom that fostered my own learning. Learning would be personal and relevant. I envisioned a classroom where learning was a social act. You'd be left out if you didn't read or write. Peers would be accepting and nonjudgmental. Texts of all kinds would line the walls waiting to be borrowed. You could risk and experiment without the fear of failure. And success was to be shared and applauded.

By mid-September, students were sharing their writing with their families as well as their peers and the power of writing and its ability to bring us closer together was becoming evident to parents as well as students. Our community of

learners extended beyond the classroom walls. Parents were invited to write for a class book entitled *Points of View*. Together with an in-depth class inquiry into the controversy surrounding the 500th anniversary of Columbus' voyage to the New World, we became a community of learners connected not only to each other, but to the world at large.

Perspectives Rationale

My middle-school, sixth-grade language arts classes were suburban, middle-class, heterogeneously grouped and multicultural, with an even mix of African-American, Caucasian, and Chaldean students. One of the classes was co-taught by a special education teacher as it also included learning disabled students. Each sixth grade language arts class met for two periods daily.

Building a community of learners out of such a diverse group of students meant we would have to become sensitive to different points of view. I intended to use the study of Columbus to initiate a unit on perspectives for my language arts classes.

Why Columbus in language arts? Isn't that subject the domain of history teachers? To me, all curricula is about building literacy. And language arts deals with our ability to interact with

texts of all kinds, both spoken and written, in a meaningful way. Through the study of Columbus, I'd found a vehicle to build literacy in my classroom. The timeliness of the subject, the wide variety of texts available, and the controversy surrounding his voyages would enable my students to be part of a real world dialogue carried on in homes and the media as well as in classrooms across the country. It would be possible to hold different opinions about Columbus depending on one's viewpoint without having to be right or wrong.

Inquiry

I began collecting books, newspaper clippings, editorials, and magazines on the subject. In October, when the news media was saturated with articles about Columbus, we began our perspectives inquiry. I read aloud Jane Yolen's book, *Encounter*. It relates the landing of Columbus from a native Taino boy's point of view. With rapt attention, the class listened, circled closely together on our rug. *Encounter* captured the students' interest and their imaginations. Next, I read excerpts to the class from Columbus' own journal so we could better understand his point of view.

With our interest piqued, we were ready to begin a more in-depth inquiry into the controversy surrounding Columbus. It was time to tap into prior knowledge. If we could identify what we already knew about Columbus, it would be easier to attach new knowledge. And it would be easier to discover what we still wanted to know.

Once the students became responsible for their own learning, motivation became irrelevant.

I wanted to take advantage of the social aspects of learning. I wanted us to be able to learn from each other and trigger each other's ideas and enthusiasm. Brainstorming was an ideal way to generate ideas and cooperative learning groups would best meet my objectives.

Lots of talk ensued and in groups we developed lists of things we already knew about Columbus. We shared our lists of prior knowledge, then returned to our cooperative learning groups to decide what we still wanted to know. This formed the ownership component that is so crucial to any inquiry. I could facilitate, but they had to decide what they most wanted to know. Once the students became responsible for their own learning, motivation became irrelevant. Both individually and collectively the students "bought in." They were engaged in learning. In addition, what they wanted to know was far more extensive than any information I would have imparted had I been lecturing on Columbus.

Each group then shared their questions as I feverishly wrote them on the overhead projector. After looking them over, we decided they fit into several distinct categories. We grouped the questions under the headings: Voyages, Explorations, Natives, Personal Life, and Opinion. Questions emerged such as: was the crew willing or forced to set sail with Columbus? How did the crew feel about Columbus? What did Columbus actually discover? What happened to the natives Columbus brought back to Spain after his first voyage? Did Columbus have a family? Did he have regrets? What became of him after his journeys? Why is Columbus' voyage to the New World controversial today? Each category contained over a dozen questions to research.

Teams chose a category to research with the understanding that they were to find the answers to the class questions and share them with the entire class at a given time. Each team drew a card listing a method of presentation. When the time came to share information we were treated to a debate, a courtroom scene, a TV Quiz Show, a visual display, and a panel discussion.

Reflections

If one group came across an article or book that related to another team's topic, they passed it on. The students folded looseleaf paper lengthwise for note taking. The left side listed their source and topic and said, What I Learned. The right side of the paper was for reflections about their learning and was headed I Thought or I Felt

or I Wondered depending on what the student had to say. I covered a rectangular table with sources for research and in a few days students were adding their own books and articles about Columbus for everyone to share.

While researching Columbus' voyages Michaela wrote, "I thought it would take more than nine days to reach land. I was surprised at how many crops the islands produced." After reading Columbus' journal, she recorded, "I felt shocked about all the lies and threats CC made to the crew."

In his reflections on Columbus' explorations Chris wrote, "I felt like C2 was a cunning and tricky man."

The more Jasleen read, the more questions she had. In her notes on exploration she wrote, "I wondered why C.C. went back if he had to risk his life."

After reading newspaper editorials about the Columbus controversy, Alice reflected, "I thought that some people were overreacting on both sides." Another entry said, "I thought C.C. was a smart man who didn't know where he was going."

Mariah had her own opinion of Christopher Columbus. She wrote, "I thought C.C. bragged about his expertise on a ship...I think it was clever for C.C. to lie to his crew."

Prior to sharing the research, students had numerous opportunities to bounce ideas and opinions off their peers and reflect in writing about their discoveries. The students' interaction with text, both verbal and written, enabled them to construct meaning. We were on our way to becoming a community of learners.

Parent/Child Literacy

Inspired by Nancie Atwell's book, *In the Middle*, my students and I began the year engaged in a reading/writing workshop. Our early pieces were autobiographical. Enthused, some students were sharing their writings with their parents as well as their peer response groups in school. It was that sharing that led to our parent/child collaborative book entitled *Points of View*.

About the same time we were studying Columbus, I had a chance conversation with our assistant principal, Sterling Russell, whose son

was in my class. She stopped me to add her insight to a story Marcus had written about his sister. Seeing how visibly moved she was by their shared experience, I asked her if she'd consider writing about the incident from her point of view. Graciously, she agreed.

I realized a parent/child book was a perfect opportunity to reinforce our unit on perspectives. It would provide an audience for our work. And it was a chance for parents to be directly involved in the classroom and be models for their children.

At the start of third hour, I enthusiastically shared my encounter with Marcus' mom and as a class we began to brainstorm possibilities. What if other parents could write about our pieces from their point of view? Could we put together a class book? What if a parent wasn't involved in the event? Could a sister or brother write about it instead?

Yuri said, "I ran into a wall at school last year and got stitches. Corey saw it. Could he write about it?"

"What if no one saw it?"

"Could you rewrite your piece from a different character's point of view?"

Excitedly, Ara added, "I can rewrite my ski trip story from the ski's point of view!"

I realized a parent/child book was a perfect opportunity to reinforce our unit on perspectives. It would provide an audience for our work. And it was a chance for parents to be directly involved in the classroom and be models for their children. Parents would experience just as their children experience the struggle and satisfaction writing can bring.

I wrote the following letter and sent it home inviting parents to contribute pieces for our book.

Dear Parents,

We are currently gathering articles for this year's first class book. It will be entitled Points of View and will be a collection of short

stories and anecdotes written by your children. While your submissions are encouraged, they are voluntary.

Your help in this endeavor would be most appreciated. As many of the students' initial pieces draw heavily on their past experiences, you may be familiar with the situation or incident your child chose to write about. We would like to show how the same experience can be viewed differently by different people and how a point of view can vary depending on one's perspective.

Which leads to the need for your assistance. If your child has written about something you're familiar with, or have witnessed, would you please write about it from your vantage point? We would like to include your piece next to your child's piece in our book. Please don't be concerned about spelling, punctuation, or handwriting. We'll edit and type your story for you if necessary.

When your child sees you write, especially about something that is important to him/her, you reinforce the idea that writing is something we all do and that you value it. In addition, seeing your version of an event deepens understanding.

Finally, your writing provides a meaningful model for your child.

This parent/child writing collaboration is a first! Its success will depend on the number of parents who are willing to take the time to write for our book. Please discuss this with your child and feel free to call me if you have any questions. Our due date is in three weeks. We look forward to an overwhelming response. Thank you for your time and effort.

Parent Involvement

For parents, the first year of middle school is very unsettling. The school is bigger than the neighborhood elementary school, it's less personal, and there are more teachers to know. Additionally, the adolescent's push towards independence and peers and away from parents creates an even greater distance between school and home. Parents may want to know what's happening in the middle school classroom, but often their information must be gleaned from monosyllabic

answers and papers stuffed randomly in loose leaves.

Points of View was one way for my teaching partner and me to open our reading/writing workshop classroom to our parents. At Curriculum Night we posted sign-up sheets for parent volunteers. We asked for editors, typists, readers, or any other specialty a parent could offer.

...the adolescent's push towards independence and peers and away from parents creates an even greater distance between school and home.

We had a standing arrangement with the keyboarding teacher to send all of our final drafts to her eighth graders for typing. Before sending out our drafts that we'd written, we peer-conferenced, revised, edited, and reconferenced our pieces. Parent volunteers edited our first typed drafts, and other parents typed the final copies of our book. Nine parents submitted pieces for our book, but many more contributed to it in other ways.

We made several copies of each page, organized them alphabetically, slipped each page into a protective see-through plastic cover and placed the sheets into three-ring binders to be circulated among the students. Covers for the books were designed by the students as well. Every student had a piece in the book. I wrote the following opening letter excerpted here:

As I write this introduction two thoughts spill onto these pages. First and foremost, I am very proud to be part of a community that is willing to become directly involved in the education of its children. This book says much more than what is on these pages. It says that writing is for all of us and can draw us closer together. It says that we can become a community of learners regardless of our age or ability. In addition this book provides an audience for our earliest work.

It is now November and as I collate the students' pieces, I am struck by the vast differences between their early writing this fall and what I currently am privileged to

read. Almost without exception, this writing has matured and developed. Openings now reach out to capture the reader's attention. A grace of language that results from students' continuous reading brings life to their works. The rudimentary elements of setting and characters create new logical worlds on their pages. Many new genres have been explored: poetry, science fiction, letters, interviews, adventure, mystery, survival, travel, children's literature, folklore, and humor. What an adventure!

I can hardly wait to publish the sequel to Points of View. It will have to be Then And Now, a Journey Through Writing or some such fancy title. Enjoy our book, but remember, the best is yet to come.

Tearing Down the Walls

The parents who submitted pieces for *Points of View* were invited to read them to our class. We formed a sharing circle on the rug and our guest parent and child sat in chairs and read their pieces aloud to an accepting and appreciative audience.

So it was that we interrupted our study of Columbus one fall day to welcome Camille's father, Reverend Spencer, to read his version of Camille's story.

I have seen it hundreds of times since March 3, 1979. Yet each time there is an involuntary reaction. Sometimes a sudden emptiness as if I've missed every meal for a week. Once in a while it will even elicit a tear.

But most often just a fleeting image or two. Sparkling brown eyes with just a hint of mischief, shoulder length black hair, wild and frizzy one day, perfectly combed and styled the next. Oh, the images come with sound as well as picture. A laugh heard often, a voice so distinctive.

And then a doctor's voice appears, Reyes-Syndrome, she says. Very little time, she says. And then, it is too late, she says...

Reverend Ted Spencer

Sunday afternoon was the first time I'd visited her grave. I really wish I could have met her. If she were alive today, she would be 22

years old. She died at the age of nine. Her birthday would be October 31.

...All the time I talk to people and ask them about her, but they sometimes can't talk about her without crying...I really wish Vanessa were alive and that I could talk to her. We have a painting of her at home but that and other pictures is all there is...

Camille Spencer

Reverend Spencer's rich baritone brought life to his words and tears to our eyes. He had not heard Camille's version of her sister's death until now nor had they discussed it at home. The silence was tangible as the students quietly asked the Reverend questions about Reyes-Syndrome and the Reverend, composed, patiently addressed each concern.

I escorted Reverend Spencer to the classroom door and we shook hands and agreed that the experience would not be forgotten. But the discussion did not end there. One student tearfully shared his pain at the loss of his best friend to leukemia just two weeks before. Another, almost incoherent, cried over the death of a baby brother at birth. Many had experienced the death of a loved one. Many had stories to tell.

Camille's writing brought us closer together. She said it made her feel better to write about something she's never been able to speak of before. We talked about personal experiences as a source for writer's ideas. The power of writing and sharing was self-evident, and the parents who shared their own pieces with the class experienced that power first hand.

Points of View showed us that writing is empowering, that it can help us see things that might otherwise go unnoticed. It can help us understand one another and draw us closer together. Our Columbus inquiry helped us ask and find answers to questions that really mattered to us. Our learning was connected to the real world. As we reflected on our research, we learned that writing can help us construct meaning. There's no question that we learned to appreciate different points of view and in the process became an extended community of learners.

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