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Bean Kinney Klusendorf

Teaching Writing Today: Creating Writers, Not Just Students-Who-Write

Write what matters," I say to my high school seniors in the first week of class. They stare blankly, and I think two things: they don't know what I mean or they don't know what matters. As it turns out, it's a little of both.

Thus part of my job is to show them how to find what matters in their lives, and then, how to write about it. Their parents' recent divorce? The aging nuclear power plant 14 miles north of town that might be leaking tritium? The confusing mirage of grants and promises that are supposed to fund their college education? These are things that probably matter to them, but given the opportunity to write about them, they freeze—and then they beg to analyze the symbolism of Gatsby's green light or to explicate Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight." It seems they've had so little classroom experience in fostering their own ideas that they prefer reverting to a comfortable routine of analyzing literature rather than exploring the ideas that keep them awake at night.

This is not to say that literary analysis or poetry explication are not worthy thinking and writing assignments for high school students. They are. But students also need to engage in writing that is not an analysis of or response to literature. When they are shown how to dig deep and explore what matters to them, and when they are given ample opportunities to write about these ideas, something magical happens. This is when my classroom takes on a new personality. This is when students walk in talking about their drafts before they even set their books down, and I hear snippets of spirited conversation about triumphs over the perfect word to end a poem, frustration over images that are still unclear. Sometimes research contradicts a thesis, and I hear frustrated mumbles, or there is confusion about how to explode a moment without adding filler. Sometimes it is celebration over the perfect visual metaphor in a digital story. It's clear that students spent time thinking deeply about the purpose of their poem or the "convincingness" of their argument or the emotion of a scene or story. As a writing teacher, what more could I ask for? Clearly they are invested.

When we help our students find what matters to them, they will be more likely to delve into those ideas and bring them out through authentic poetry or stories or essays. No matter what genre they chose—or we assign—they will be more engaged in their work if it grows organically from within. In "The Importance of Choice," Penny Kittle (2007) refers to this as "emotional investment" and she writes about connecting students to their passions because "when students choose their topics, they write more and learn more" (p. 210). For me, that's when the magic takes hold.

Once students find their own ideas and dive into the writing, we need to provide them with enough time devoted solely to writing so that they will view themselves as writers, not just

students-who-write. Writers engage in a continuous, recursive process of drafting and revising over an extended period of time, perhaps working on several pieces at once. Students-who-write look at writing differently. They approach each assignment as a single entity to be completed so they can move on to something else. Kittle calls these "writing activities. . . nothing but exercises that our students draft and rewrite as little as possible to get the paper done" (p. 210). I don't want to read piles of those.

So I will address two important concepts that can be adapted for every English classroom: the importance of helping students develop their own ideas and giving them a block of time large enough to become immersed in their own writing so they see themselves as writers.

Helping Students Find Ideas

At least once a year in our 12th grade writing course, my colleague and I turn to Jack Rawlins' essay "Getting Good Ideas," a chapter in *Language Awareness* (1997) edited by Paul Eschholz, Alfred Rosa, and Virginia Clark. We use this essay when we begin our multigenre research project, an eight-week unit in which students immerse themselves in inquiry and writing, exploring

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one major research question. To stay engaged for eight weeks, students need to find something they care deeply about, and using Rawlins' approach, they usually do. Following his advice, they begin by writing 18 statements about a variety of issues, ideas, emotions, or images. From there, they talk through each statement with a partner and see what connections might form among the statements or what further ideas one statement may lead to. In his essay, Rawlins compares this thinking process to the action of billiard balls. He writes "a new stimulus hitches up with an old bit stored long ago in the memory; the incoming billiard ball hits an old one that's just lying there, and they fly off together" (pp. 480-481). So a piece of writing or the central idea for an inquiry project may start when something we observe connects with something we already know.

For example, one student in my class wrote a number of statements about cars on his original list—clearly that was a passion of his. In his conversation with a partner, he discussed the "cool factor" of a red corvette which led to statements about men, cars and macho culture. This led them to the idea of mid-life crises in men. That led to a discussion of divorce which ultimately led to his central research question: with so much public emphasis on family values, why is di-

voice so common and so accepted in our society? The student who arrived at this question may have come from a divorced family or perhaps his parents were in the middle of a divorce or maybe his father had recently bought a red corvette. But I don't think he would have arrived at his central question without going through a lot of thinking and connecting first. As Rawlins suggests, our students usually don't wake up in the morning with an announcement of their essay topic. They arrive at it through an active process.

Ultimately, the central research question a student decides on may not have been on his original list of 18 statements at all, but writing the statements is an important part of the thinking process—and the thinking process eventually leads to that central question. Donald Murray (2007) recommends a similar process in "Write Before Writing." He discusses the importance of observing, thinking, connecting, and jotting as a way of finding ideas, not just finding a topic.

For our eight-week research project, we spend three or four days, sometimes a week devoted to finding ideas. That may seem like a lot of time (though students read articles, finish a previous project, and engage in a few other activities during this time as well), but when they arrive at something meaningful and begin to think through how they want to approach this central inquiry question, the biggest hurdle of the project is already behind them. If they're going to spend a quarter of the year researching and writing multiple pieces, they better find what matters to them—even if it takes an entire week.

Shorter pieces of writing—a single poem, a narrative, an essay—require less time devoted to developing ideas, but I still spend a good chunk of class time helping my students discover what matters because many students have so little experience finding their own ideas that they aren't very good at it—and they give up too easily. Kittle writes about a student who was struggling to discover how to write from his own experience. He "had to be freed from formulas" and needed to be both "allowed and required to choose" (p. 209). Similarly, Gretchen Bernabei (2007) starts with "truisms," statements about life that students can fill in with specific experiences. In "The School Essay" she asks students to "think of life lessons that begin with the sentence, 'I've learned that sometimes. . . ' and finish that sentence" (p. 76). This general statement triggers memorable experiences that students can then begin developing by filling in specific details. For another jumping off point, we can turn to Barry Lane's blog, 1000 Things to Write About. He posts prompts, images, and sample poems to help us generate ideas that will spark powerful writing. Using a variety of prompts, quick writes, images, and Rawlins's reminder about billiard ball thinking, I find that idea time is time well spent because it results in writing that my students truly care about.

A few years ago, I asked my ninth graders to observe their world and find a current adolescent issue important to them, one that could be loosely or tightly connected to *Romeo and Juliet*, our anchor text. I wanted them to figure out precisely what they thought about the issue, to grapple with its moral implications, and then to develop an argument supporting a particular aspect of the issue. After a number of quick writes, listing activities, and using the billiard ball approach—thinking, writing statements, discussing, connecting—one student

moved from Juliet's rebellion to a struggle of her own. She was Indian, and her parents intended to carry on their cultural tradition of arranged marriage. Though they had not chosen her bridegroom, they had no intention of allowing her to date a boy from our school. Ultimately, her essay explored whether parents should or should not restrict their teenager's social relationships in an effort to carry on important cultural traditions. In her essay, she made a number of references to key ideas from *Romeo and Juliet*, but the essay was hers. It was her life, her struggle, her argument. She engaged in the writing because it had personal and moral implications. I saw passion.

Stephanie Harvey (1998) writes about the importance of this kind of choice in her book *Nonfiction Matters*. She recalls a moment when a teacher she has been advising reads fifth-grade reports, describing them as "dull! No life whatsoever" and then thinking to herself how different they are from her students' story writing (p. 3). Harvey reflects on her own experience in which she not only wrote dull reports in school as a student but also assigned them as a teacher. It wasn't until years later that she realized "the best nonfiction writing emerges from topics the writer knows, cares, and wonders about and wants to pursue" (p. 4). That's why a research essay discussing parent restrictions, cultural heritage, and teenage rebellion, a topic generated from a student's own interest after reading *Romeo and Juliet*, is likely to be much more compelling than an essay written by the same student analyzing a significant theme of the play, relying primarily on text references to develop it.

But the kind of dull writing that Harvey writes about isn't a problem specific to nonfiction writing. It can happen with poetry and narrative as well. It may seem like we're giving our students choice and creative freedom when we assign them a personal narrative. But too often, we assign them a personal narrative that must fit a particular theme. After reading James Hurst's "The Scarlet Ibis," a story in which the narrator reflects on a time in his childhood when he was cruel to his little brother, a teacher might ask students to write a personal narrative about a time when they were cruel to someone they cared about. That prompt might work beautifully for some students and not at all for others. And when half of the class produces a narrative that lacks detail and voice, it's tempting to think I let them write about their own lives and some of them have so little to say. They'd be better off writing a literary analysis essay analyzing the use of cruelty as a motif in the story. Yet those students for whom the prompt didn't resonate might have had compelling stories to tell about other aspects of their childhood. They simply needed choice. As Kittle states it, "...choice—more, and more, and more" (p. 212). With a number of different prompts or idea-generating exercises, most students will find a compelling story from

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their childhood that would make a fine personal narrative with a clear purpose and lots of descriptive detail. When they find something that matters, a good piece is likely to follow.

Immersing Students in Writing

Too many of our students see themselves as students-who-write rather than writers. This may be partly due to lack of choice in what they are allowed to write about. But it's more than that. Generally, they are given a writing assignment, they travel through steps of the writing process, and they complete the assignment, at which point they are 'done' until the next assignment comes along. Even if these students seem to fully engage in the writing process producing several drafts, workshopping their piece with members of a response group (in class or online using tools like Google Docs), and showing real revision along the way, most of them are still effectively traveling from assignment to assignment in a product-centered approach rather than engaging as real writers.

But what if they weren't done? What if they began another writing assignment, and then another after that? What if they were working on a number of pieces concurrently? What if they kept writing for a solid eight or nine weeks? Might they see themselves as writers by the end of it? They might realize that writing is seldom done, and that they could continue to apply their skills in new ways to new pieces. They might return to old pieces and see them in a new light. They might start thinking of their next piece before the current one is turned in, and they might discover their unique voice and they might voluntarily seek response from others. In short, they could become a community of writers rather than a community of English students who have to write.

I call this "writing flow," and it happens through writing immersion. In *Readicide*, Kelly Gallagher (2009) describes reading flow as being "completely engrossed" or "utterly lost within a book" (pp. 60-61), and though I don't think most students will become so lost in their writing that they will forget to "come up for air," (p. 61) I think it's a similar concept. I would describe writing flow as achieving a feeling of being in the groove, something that feels bumpy and awkward for a while and eventually smooths out as students gain momentum. And momentum is gained through immersion. In *The National Writing Project's Because Writing Matters*, Donald Graves (2003) says that if we provide frequent occasions for writing, then the students start to think about writing when they're not doing it." His term for this is constant composition (p. 22).

Think about runners getting in shape. When I was a runner, I spent a month each spring getting back in shape after taking a hiatus from running for much of the winter. The only way I could get into a running flow was to run every day or almost every day for about 4 weeks. The first week was the worst—I always felt like I'd never get past the out-of-breath-awkward-stride phase. But then it gradually got easier, and by the end of the fourth week, I was in the groove. After that I could easily cut back to two or three times a week and start adding other activities such as swimming or biking. I knew I wouldn't lose the ability to run a decent four or five miles because I'd built a foundation.

That's what I'm referring to with writing flow: helping students build a solid writing foundation by immersing them in a writing unit of five, six, or even nine weeks at the beginning of each school year. With this foundation under them, they would be well-equipped to approach writing assignments for the rest of the year, and more important, they establish the momentum to write in a traditional assignment-by-assignment every few weeks approach. If they see themselves as writers by the end of the first quarter, they are able to build on their skills rather than battle the feeling of starting over each time they approach a new assignment. They see that the descriptive detail they worked so hard on with poetry and personal narrative can be used with micro essays and literary analysis. And they see that establishing a single purpose and tone in a poem they wrote in October can apply to developing a thesis for a research paper in March.

At our school, we use this approach in English 9, and I see a marked difference in my students' attitude and ability in writing compared to what it was three years ago before we used this approach. The amount of writing completed over the course of the year isn't that different between my students today and those of three years ago. It's the approach that's different. Shifting a good chunk of the writing to the first nine weeks has allowed us to keep a momentum going by constantly referring to the work they produced during that time. We spend less time starting over each time we add a new assignment in the other three quarters of the year, and we have a firmly established vocabulary and skill set to which we can refer at any time. Of course, we're adding and building as the year progresses, but it feels like we're always rolling forward. As well, students see each new piece of writing less as another assignment and more as another opportunity to practice their skills and develop their voice. After eight or nine weeks, they have bought into writing. They feel a sense of ownership in their work. Later in the year when we are two weeks into a novel and haven't done much sustained writing, it's not uncommon for students to ask when we're going to write again.

If we took this approach every year of high school, we would spend far less time re-teaching skills and far more time building on what students have already practiced. And over the course of their four years, our students would engage in four quarters of writing immersion—the equivalent of one full year. So even if they don't take a full-year writing course in their junior or senior years of high school, they would have a solid foundation as they head off to college or a vocational program or the workplace. And if they do take a full-year writing course in their last two years, imagine how much more they could hone their writing skills if they came into such a class having already engaged in writing immersion a quarter of every year. In *Because Writing Matters*, the first recommendation on improving student writing is simple: students need "frequent, supportive practice." Later it adds,

Too many of our students see themselves as students-who-write rather than writers.

“evidence shows that writing performance improves when a student writes often and across content areas” (p. 13). Though the book doesn’t specify how much time should be devoted to writing, it does specify that schools “need to have students write more” (p. 14). Yet, even when we know this, it’s so hard, once the school year gets underway, to find enough time devoted solely to writing. With a multi-week immersion approach, we are far more likely to carve out the time we know our students need. If we don’t, it will too easily slide out of our grasp, and before we know it, it’s May.

By establishing writing flow each year of high school and by allowing students to choose and develop their own ideas, they might begin to see themselves as writers rather than as students who complete writing assignments. And that’s something we would all look forward to.

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