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Teaching Writing at the Middle School ... and Living to Tell About It

Tom Anderson

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*(Teaching Writing at the Middle School ... and
Living to Tell About It, Tom Anderson, p. 3)*

resource for the students' own writing. We frequently discuss an author's style and technique of writing. As I map out my long range plans, all of my lessons are built around the students' writing. Daily mini-lessons are determined by the needs I see in my students' writing. And of course writing in one form or another takes place every day in my classroom.

Although it may seem as though I am sacrificing other necessary skills for my students to engage in the writing process, I prefer to believe they learn these skills *through* the writing process. As they write, my students learn to use the library, to organize their thoughts, to work within a group, to speak, listen, and view, and of course they read a great deal. I don't want my students to learn or view these different skills in isolation from one another, rather I want them to understand how these things connect.

Only for my most talented writers, however, do these connections occur automatically. I think the best tool I have to help my students make these connections in their writing is my own enthusiasm for writing and reading. Inevitably when I share a descriptive passage from a book I really enjoy, it sparks interest in my students, or when I read something I have written to my class they start to see writing in a little bit different light. I see the effects in the work

Waldo

The black cat stalks,

E Y E S wide and h u u n g r y ,

His tail s e
 h s and swe
 w s r
 i v
 e
 s,

Tooth and Claw B A R E D ,

 C H
 R E
Back A D,

Thirsty for bl

 o
 o
 d,
 ,
 ,

his soft paws c r e e e e p ,

 !
 p
 a

faster and faster, the le

RRROOOWWRRRRRR!!!

TINKLE, TINKLE, TINKLE,
the little ball is dead.

my students produce. At the beginning of the year when I ask students to write personal narratives about an experience they've had, I ask them to help me revise a piece about my most embarrassing moment in the third grade. In return, I always get stories about similar experiences my students have had. Or when we work on poetry I always write and share my poetry with my students. One poem is called "Waldo." Waldo is the black cat that my wife picked up from the humane society three years ago. I've been a cat lover all my life, but Waldo is playful to the point of being deadly. When I share this poem I become bombarded with cat poems. Katie's poem "Cat M.T.V." is one of my favorites.

Cat M.T.V.

A cat's M.T.V. is a window,
with all the things he can see.
A squirrel,
a sparrow,
a cocker spaniel,
Hissing, he forgets about the pane of glass
and he tries to run through the window.
And now the kitty has a sore head,
and he blames the cocker spaniel!

by Katie McFadden 11/16/94

This also works when we talk about the stories we read. When we read Alice Walker's "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens," and we discuss quilting and other traditional forms men and women have used to express their creative spirit, students dive into writing essays about quilting or other family traditions. Many times students bring in the childhood quilts that their own mothers and grandmothers have sewn for them. Of course similar effects occur when students share their own books and their own writing. And by saving some of my favorites student writings, I have resources for future years.

Through sharing reading and writing, students learn a great deal. They learn to

organize their thoughts and work within a group. They learn about different cultures and societies. They discover the possibilities that lie waiting for them in the library. And all of this is done in connection to the process of writing. Everything they do is a pre-writing activity for their next piece. What we read and share as a class is always discussed in connection with its value as a piece of writing. Through mimicry, imitation, borrowing, stealing, and creative rewriting the students gradually start to produce work that they take pride in and value. This only starts, however, when I begin the process by demonstrating how much pride I take in my writing.

With this much emphasis on writing, however, the paper load can become extremely burdensome, especially for those teachers who have not learned the value of prioritizing. I teach 160 students during the day and cannot grade everything my students write. As a teacher of writing you must be selective in what and how you grade. It is not necessary to read and grade everything your students write. You can't. You need to strike a sane balance between informal and formal writing. Yes, students need to take pieces through the writing process from pre-writing to publishing. Less formal writing activities, however, can teach as much if not more to your students.

As students follow the process on their formal assignments, they regularly work on informal assignments as well. Some of the informal writings I use are:

Writer's Log — This is a journal or their thoughts and reflections on their reading and writing. In this they also keep their "Writer's Workshop," which is a section that contains the notes they have taken from our mini-lessons.

Process Piece — This is an informal essay where the students explain the process they've gone through with a particular writing assignment or project.

Especially useful at the end of the project.

Exit Slips — On small slips of paper students write their thoughts in response to a question or assignment connected with the day's lesson. As they leave the classroom they hand these slips to the teacher.

Admit Slips — Same concept as an exit slip, but the students hand these in as they enter a classroom. This can be a great way to start class discussion.

Fast writes — Put simply the students write as much as they can and as fast as they can relating to a classroom prompt. They do not stop writing for the entire time given; if they run out of ideas, they simply write "blank, blank," or a similar term until ideas return to them.

Clustering — Students put a key concept, term, or name circled in the middle of the page and then free-associate, jotting down all the ideas which occur to them in circles around the initial term. Also called webbing or mapping.

These informal writings help me survive the incredible paper load. I don't grade all of these things. Many are only for the students' benefit that I neither collect nor grade, and I only actually hear about if they share it in class or group discussion. Other informal writings such as the exit slips or admit slips I grade on a credit or no-credit basis. If they turn it in and have met my minimum expectations I give them credit. These take only a few seconds per student to grade. Other informal writings that take larger portions of class time, I might grade a little more seriously. I use a ++, +, or ✓, system. I feel this eliminates the student's fear of doing poorly, and encourages them to take risks. In

their logs and on the process pieces they write I occasionally will write a short note to the student along with their grade. One thing I do not do with informal writings is correct it for mechanical errors such as grammar and spelling. These are not the students' best efforts, because I have not given them the time to revise. Through these I hope to learn what the students are thinking.

Through trial and error I am gradually learning the survival skills of teaching writing. The most important lesson I've learned so far is to prioritize. I start with my classroom focus. Mine is squarely on writing. My lessons are designed so that I can share my enthusiasm for writing. I share a great deal of my own writing and my favorite pieces from published authors and student's past and present. I then prioritize what I assign and grade. My time is priceless; I don't need to waste it grading assignments that don't focus on writing. I give very few tests and quizzes; more frequently I use informal writing to assess their learning. As long as I don't preoccupy myself with mechanics, grading these is very easy. I grade their effort and the expression of their thoughts. By sticking to my convictions and teaching what I feel is important and what I love, I keep my sanity. The bottom line is that as a teacher I need to be happy; I need to spend time with my wife, son, and even Waldo, my cat. I need to have time to read and write for myself. I even need to coach, because it gives me a different perspective of kids. These things make me happy, and if I'm happy and my students see me as a reader and a writer, Language Arts takes on an entirely different light for everyone.

Tom Anderson is a teacher with the Edwardsburg Middle School and a member of the Third Coast Writing Project.