

2008

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Recommended Citation

Knudson, Brigitte (2008) "Legitimizing Voice: Writing Letters to the Editor," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 24: Iss. 1, Article 8.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1103>

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Legitimizing Voice: Writing Letters to the Editor

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Part 1: Losing and Regaining Hope

"My sweetest hope is to lose hope." – Pierre Corneille
When I got the call during the summer from my principal, my heart sank. Because of No Child Left Behind's "highly qualified" mandate and my status as the only remaining teacher with journalism certification at our high school, I would be teaching the journalism classes in my building—basic journalism and newspaper/yearbook—in addition to my usual load of Advanced Placement classes for this school year. The expectation was that I would step in and handle the extra load without missing a beat, with a journalism curriculum that hadn't been updated in twenty-two years, a textbook from 1984, and a classroom set of newspapers delivered daily. The news, combined with my partner's cancer diagnosis several weeks before, turned my world upside down.

My principal and colleagues had no doubt that I could rise to the occasion and pull off this feat, as I was a veteran teacher with twelve years of high school experience and chair of the department. With a full plate at home, including taking graduate classes, raising a twelve-year old, and having to care for a loved one with a serious illness, I was suddenly losing hope that I could do it. Then I received a brief email, just a paragraph, a week before the school year began from a former student, who had struggled through one of my writing classes several years before, thanking me for taking the time to help him become a better writer. That was all I needed. If I could affect the life of one student that way, then I would do everything in my power to make sure that my journalism classes would be a success no matter

the obstacles. After completely losing hope, I had regained a sense of hope and purpose—my students.

Part 2: The Journey Begins

"A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." – Lao-tzu

On the first day of school, my *Introduction to Journalism* students began to arrive. Like any first day, we began to size each other up. A diverse group, students ranged from ninth to twelfth graders and represented a variety of abilities, from struggling learners well below grade level to highly motivated college prep types. As is my wont, we began to have a conversation, not just about journalism, but about their likes, dislikes, and anything else they thought they needed to tell me. I was particularly curious about why they had signed up for the class, and discovered that some needed the English credit to graduate after failing core English classes, others wanted to learn journalism, and still others were in class because their schedule needed a slot filled and my fifth-hour class was the only one available.

After breaking the ice, I distributed an introductory survey so I could get a more complete picture of my students. I already had access to general test scores through our online system, but students' perceptions provide another insight that test scores cannot, such as their interests and motivations, how they view themselves as readers and writers, as well as a snapshot of their writing ability—all keys to successful lesson planning.

When the bell rang and after they quickly filed out, I began to read their responses. Answers varied from question marks to one word to elaborate paragraphs (the directions called for "complete sentences" and "elaboration"). Students' responses to the question, *How do you describe yourself as a reader?* ran the gamut from "slow" to "I am not a very good reader because I am easily distracted"; "I haven't been reading that much" to "I pretty much read only SLAM magazine and stuff like *Sports Illustrated* or ESPN." When asked, *How do you describe yourself as a writer?* students' written responses revealed not

only perceptions about their writing, but also their level of skill to some extent: “I have some good & bad days for writing” to “As a writer I am very detail oriented; I like to use imagery”; “I describe myself as a good writer” to “I can write very well when I try and have an interesting topic.”

One of the most surprising aspects of the survey, however, was that the majority responded that they did not read or have knowledge about current events, with the exception of sports news or an occasional celebrity. Given that only twenty percent of students polled in class had adults at home who read a newspaper, this shouldn't have surprised me. What did surprise me is that most students also indicated that they did not understand how current events topics were relevant to them. By their own admission, they were on the outside looking in, and I considered it my job to help them “unveil” the reality that underlies their interactions with and within the world, so they could begin to see the world not only through a more critical lens, but also to begin to feel more invested in it (Freire 62).

Journalism is a course driven by current events. As part of the class, we would be reading the newspaper not only to keep us informed, but also to use those articles as models (or mentor texts) for writing. Ellen Potter et al. write that using real world texts in the classroom are instrumental in demonstrating to students the authentic value of writing (54). My plan was that students would come into class every day and have time read the newspaper—their reading determined by their interests—and the reading would serve to strengthen their knowledge of both current events as well as the types of journalistic writing. By their own admission, they needed time to read, and research says that readers and writers become more engaged in reading and writing if they are given time for these activities in school (e.g., Atwell 196-198).

When students came in the next day and we started looking at the newspaper, I was shocked to discover that most had no idea how to navigate its pages. So we began with that first step. Journalism 101. At the end of the day, it was obvious that my work was cut out for me.

Part 3: The Police Blotter

“It never got weird enough for me.”
– Hunter S. Thompson

The first obstacle was to motivate students—who were essentially non-reader—to not only read but to read the newspaper. Though I rationalized that choice would be a positive factor in their motivation, I quickly realized that when given the open-ended assignment to read what they liked in the newspaper, many of the students would turn to the advertising circulars or the comics and spend the twenty-minute reading time looking at pictures. This was not going to accomplish my goal of modeling newspaper writing. I needed to get them to read *articles* that were interesting to them so I could have something to work *from*.

My mind wandered back to summer vacation in Big Bay. Every afternoon at four o'clock, I would send my daughter up to the corner store to get a copy of the *Mining Journal*, where she would immediately turn to the Police Log to read the bizarre litany of events, such as: beach-goer finds lost Speedo and (separate incident) family reports nude swimmer. She was enthralled by the drama and implication all summer. If only I could get my students similarly interested.

So that's when I introduced them to the Police Blotter part of the local newspaper, a section with paragraph excerpts of news events. The first day I had them look, it was a stellar day for blotter news. The headline read: *Man with apparent foot fetish faces charges*, and the paragraph described how a twenty-nine-year old man in court for foot-fetish related charges was busted in court for touching an assistant prosecutor's foot with a thin wire. For all of its sensationalism, it got their attention. They were hooked. For the rest of the semester, the Police Blotter became a favorite for reading, often with students reading the random weirdness aloud to each other, an activity that morphed into the current round-robin, where each student would choose an interesting story to share briefly with the class each day. The semester was starting to look up.

Part 4: Writing Letters to the Editor

“Yet only through communication can human life hold meaning.” – Paulo Freire

Students were beginning to get excited about news and become invested readers, but the next step was to get my students to make the transition to writing journalism. Because most had never read the Editorial and Opinion

pages before taking the class, we took several days analyzing and reading the different types of writing that appear in the section—what distinguishes an editorial from an opinion from a letter to the editor. Then we began focusing on the letters to the editor and how they serve as a forum for the community’s opinions, noting that an editor chooses the section’s content. Some of the questions I asked the class to consider included: *How many letters to the editor appear each day? What subjects do they address? What opinions are represented? How long is each letter?*

Immediately, the class sparked to life, becoming more critical readers. They noticed the numbers of letters each day varied according to the length of the letters chosen to appear that day. Students also noticed that the letters were as diverse as the articles they had been reading in the newspaper—they addressed a variety of subjects taking a variety of positions. In fact, one struggling senior, Dwayne, had an epiphany when he noticed a letter praising a community event: “You mean letters to the editor don’t have to be about politics and stuff? They can just be about anything you want or like?” he asked. “Absolutely,” I answered. He was won over. Dwayne and the others were learning that real thinking wasn’t something happening remotely—like in an ivory tower—but in everyday communication (Freire 58).

One thing I’ve learned to keep sight of in the battle of standardization is the idea that student motivation about writing improves given real audiences and purposes (Atwell 489). Moreover, when engaging students in public writing, like writing letters to the editor, we are teaching students “...the attitudes, relationships, and practices that are the preconditions for imagining oneself and others as participants in social policy making and agents of social change,” (Welch 15). My hope was that through writing the students would see their voices and ideas as valid ones in the larger society, and that the apathy I observed at the beginning of the semester would begin to wither. But this depended on publication, the last step of the writing process that has been traditionally reserved for classroom venues and not necessarily public ones like the local newspaper.

After laying the groundwork, I took my students to the computer lab to write their letters. While I provided them a brief handout of the newspaper’s guidelines, email

information, and a kind suggestion to spell check before sending, they were on their own to write a letter to the editor about something they’d read in the newspaper in the last week that interested them. Upon finishing, students were required to submit a printout of the sent email in order to receive credit for the assignment.

The composing process was interesting to observe. Knowing they would be writing a letter, some students had clipped and saved articles from the previous week that interested them, which they immediately pulled out to reread and annotate before writing. Other students found themselves scrambling, looking through the current paper for something they could write about. A few students called

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me over to ask questions about their letters—these ranged from ones of basic letter structure (*Do I write “Dear Editor”?*) to content (*How much do I need to write?*). To address these, I pointed them back to the Letters to the Editor section of the paper and asked them to recall the conversations we’d had

in class about what we’d read.

Given these models, the students were in charge of the the editorial choices. Some people believe that letters should be proofread by teachers “to avoid being ambushed in print” by editors who may wish to “stick it to the school system by lambasting the grammar errors of student correspondents” (Zemelman and Daniels 199-200). To the contrary, I decided to provide students with a more authentic experience by refusing to take the role of censor or evaluator. Instead, the rationale was to treat students as writers, to facilitate the writing process by establishing a safe environment through mutual respect, which resulted in students relishing authorial independence and exceeding my expectations.

Most students had no difficulty composing and sending the letters, and I found their variety to be refreshing—topics spanned collegiate basketball to a local

holiday parade. One student, however, was petrified. Chelsea, a sophomore, had come to my class with average skills but she perceived herself to be a weak writer. As soon as she drafted her letter, she called me over to her screen to read it and asked sheepishly. “You have to read this and tell me if it’s any good, okay?” I read her letter, which addressed hazardous substances in Chinese imports, and told her she’d done a wonderful job expressing her point of view. “All you have to do is send it to the editor and print me a copy and you’re finished,” I said. She looked up at me and asked if she could turn in the letter without sending it to the editor, expressing concern that it wasn’t “good enough” for publication. I assured her that it was, and she hesitantly completed the remaining two requirements.

When she turned in her paper, Chelsea confided that sending her letter to a *real* editor at a *real* newspaper was much different than completing an assignment in class, knowing that her only audience was the teacher. For her, the act of sending the letter breached her comfort level because she was now aware that her writing, a personal act representative of her beliefs, could reach a larger audience.

Part 5: Publishing in the Real World

“That’s what education means – to be able to do what you’ve never done before.”

– George Herbert Palmer

The semester’s beginning brought a group of students who had little interest in reading current events, yet alone writing letters to the newspaper about them. As soon as students sent their letters, they began asking when they might expect see them in the newspaper. The anticipation of publication created such a buzz of excitement that there was a race at the beginning of class to check the Letters to the Editor to see if anyone had been published. Explaining that whether or not they were published was dependent on many factors, such as the editor’s needs, available space, and the number of letters the newspaper receives on a given day, I tried to temper their excitement with realism. “Maybe we’ll see one of your letters in the paper,” I said, secretly hoping that one of sixteen would be good enough for the editor to publish.

Then a student came to class on Monday with a neatly folded section of newspaper, a sharp contrast to her

giddiness, “Guess what, Ms. Knudson? They published my letter in the paper!” She showed me her letter addressing a local vandalism issue from Sunday’s newspaper. Word of quickly spread, generating even more excitement about the possibilities of other students being published. Tuesday, three more letters appeared, amid smiles and pride of authorship, followed by one each on Thursday and Friday. Dwayne, a reluctant reader and writer, scored a moral victory when his letter applauding a local community’s parade was printed. Even students who hadn’t been published were happy for their classmates, almost as if they had scored a collective victory over the adult world that many felt worked to quell their voices.

The following Monday, after six of fifteen letters had been published, the fury died down. Students’ voices had been heard and validated in the real world, legitimizing the act of writing for them. To our surprise, the next day three more letters appeared. One of them was Chelsea’s, the girl who was so hesitant to send her letter. Misty eyed, somewhat shocked, and thoroughly satisfied, she couldn’t wait to take home the newspaper to show her parents. Wednesday, the last letter appeared, for a grand total of ten of fifteen students published in the Letters to the Editor section of the newspaper. This is what some of them had to say about the experience:

- “It showed me that almost anyone has a chance to get their writing published.” – Andy
- “I realized that the public has an opinion in the newspaper too.” – Balsam
- “I was pretty happy. My parents were extremely happy and proud. Everyone thought it was very cool and I should write more. In fact, I already wrote another letter to *SLAM Magazine*.” – Chris
- “I think the experience has made me want to write more. It is fun to see your own opinions in the paper.” – Lauren

Of the students published, all said they would write letters to the editor again, evidence of the power of writing for authentic audiences and purposes. Even students who didn’t have their work published exhibited faith that they *could* be published, the success of their peers adding to their confidence as writers and their collective sense of legitimacy of voice.

Conclusion

By participating in this activity, students were able to see the validation of their perspectives through social action, in other words how critical response resulted in their becoming part of a greater discourse community. As a result, their thinking became transformed, opening up possibilities for further engagement not only in their own learning but also in their communities and beyond. Students were learning by doing what they had never done before—isn't that what education is about?

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