

Lives Worth Writing About

“Getting students started writing isn’t getting students writing. It is getting them thinking...” (Rief, 1992, p. 38)

This is the story of how I begin a Writers’ Workshop in my classroom. I have read and studied volumes and volumes about writing and the teaching of writing, but nowhere have I found abundant instructions about what to do that first day of school - except in my dissertation (Webb, 2004) – or what to do during the first weeks of school with students who haven’t had much experience writing. Even one of my favorite writing teachers, Nancie Atwell, author of *In The Middle*, who teaches 8th grade students in her own school, has little to say on this topic. Indeed, she is famous for her ideas about the teaching of writing, but when students come to her 8th grade classroom she doesn’t have to begin teaching non-writers, she begins with students who have been writing every year during their school career.

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I teach 6th graders who have not written much – they have been “assigned” writing, but they have not learned the joys of writing from their own hearts and minds and souls. But before I truly begin the story of how I work to motivate and encourage those 6th graders to become real writers who are proud

of their writing and eager to write more, I have to apologize.

My apology is to some former students of mine...in fact, if you were a fifth grader from 1972 through 1975 at Tidewater Academy in Wakefield, Virginia, this apology is for you. I’m not sure what I believed back then about the teaching of writing, but I am sure that I was desperately trying to figure it out. I knew writing was important. I knew it was important for my students to write, but what I had not yet figured out was what I should do as a teacher to draw good authentic writing from my students. So my apology is specifically to my students from those years in the 70’s and probably to thousands of other students around America whose teachers were doing what they thought was good teaching, too. You see, I would go home and look around my house for ‘things’ that would inspire my students to write and periodically I brought them into my classroom. I placed them on a table at the front of the room, held a short discussion to get ideas flowing, and then required silence as ideas were written down. I required this frequently. And I was proud! My students were writing...well, some of them were...and I was making sure they had something to write about!

So why do I need to apologize for this? It was a well-known way to get students to write. Think about it. Did all of my students have an interest in writing about the statue of an elephant or a box of Girl Scout Thin Mints? Was an elephant their favorite animal? Did they have stories about opening a stack of thin mint cookies and eating every single cookie before they could force themselves to

stop? No...these were my stories to tell, not theirs. Had I asked my students what they were interested in? Did I think about what went on in their lives or what they had a real passion for? Was this real writing coming from the hearts and minds of my students? My students from way back then endured a teacher much like Lucy Calkins did. "When I was in school writing was assigned and then graded" (Calkins, 1994). I used to be just like Calkins' teachers – I assigned writing and then I graded it. For this I apologize. And today, now, I have figured out at least some of what I know and believe about teaching writing. I've done the thinking every teacher has to do to be effective in any classroom.

The Thinking Behind The Teaching

Sometimes I come across words that are just fun to say – like giggle. I pronounce it gig-gul. That word just makes me do what it means! And rendezvous...I pronounce it ron-day-voovoo. It is fun because it exercises so many muscles in and around my mouth. I have a whole list of words I love to pronounce...in fact, in addition to a Word Wall at the front of my classroom, we save a place for "Words That R Fun 2 Say."

I've added a new word lately – tacit – "ta sit" – both vowels are pronounced with the short (or tense) sound. This word is not only fun to say, it has become a huge word in my career. Actually it engulfs what I believe about teaching and it engulfs my reasons for viewing the teaching of writing as a premier experience in my classroom. Tacit knowledge – this concept is at the heart of my planning, teaching, and responding to students. It is a concept, which is at the heart of each of us as human beings. My goal in my classroom is to cause my students to feel what it is like to be a writer – to come

to know the many powers that writing can have during life's experiences. I teach my students about tacit knowledge. We come to explore my tacit knowledge and that of each of their classmates. From this we come to know and understand one another on many levels. This knowledge builds respect among my students and makes life in my classroom oh so much fun.

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What is tacit knowledge? "Tacit knowledge is an important part of the human being that surfaces in individual writing when teaching facilitates it. Tacit knowledge is an accumulation of many factors that create the surprises that emerge from within us... The Characteristics of personality, ancestor influence, genes, and chemical make-up mingle together to create the intuitive nature of humans that can affect writing and surprise us at anytime" (Webb, 2004, p. 36). Tacit knowledge is individual, it is specific, and it is what makes teaching one of the joys of my life. And because now, unlike 30 years ago, my students choose their own writing topics they quickly learn that power over their own ideas and their own writing is theirs alone. "...[I]ndividuals learn their powers and come to terms with their experiences differently, as a function of their distinct and separate personalities" (Foster, 1992, p. 196). Polanyi reiterates "...our tacit powers achieve...results by recognizing our experience so as to gain intellectual control over it" (1974, p. 20).

Beginning With A Monocular

My first goal, at the beginning of the school year, is two-fold. First, I want my students to look closely at their world and really notice things. Second, I want my students to value what they see as unique and individual and important. In essence I want them to acknowledge their tacit knowledge and use the many aspects of it as they view their world. To begin this process I introduce students to their monoculars. Their monoculars are right there, attached to them, hanging at the end of their arms. I teach students to curl their fingers into the palms of their hands and look through the monocular they have just created. The details they see and notice are amazing. When they block out everything else and zero in on only one knuckle on the other hand, they suddenly see the lines in the skin, the shape of the knuckle bone, and the changes that occur when that one finger is bent or stretched. It is amazing to realize what we only notice in passing every day and compare it with what we 'look' at with our monoculars. And we can look at all sorts of things from our chairs in a classroom. I have asked students to look closely at a classmate's eye or ear. And who among us has ever really studied another person's eye, looked closely at its parts, watched it blink, and noticed the slit in our facial skin that allows our eyes to be covered and then exposed? Or we can venture outside, sit on a sidewalk square or in the grass and discover all sorts of interesting natural living and non-living things. Finding an ant carrying a load twice his size is fascinating to watch. Or we can zero in on the sidewalk concrete, or the acorn that fell from a nearby oak tree. The subjects for study are virtually endless; and we all carry a handy monocular with us at all times.

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Perhaps most importantly, we must be ready to immerse our students in new situations and direct them to look in new ways. We "cannot make [students] have ideas or not have them (Dewey, 1933, p. 41), but we can place them in situations where they are likely to have sensations and ideas in worthwhile ways. "[We can begin] by looking at [our] students as teachers who instruct [us] about their lives" (Atwell, 1998, p. 55).

Recording What We See

It is important, during those first days and weeks, to create a habit of looking and recording what is seen in a journal or a notebook, or a daybook (the name is not important). Of course, I require students to write every day because "[s]o much of writing is about sitting down and doing it every day, and so much of it is about getting into the custom of taking in everything that comes along..." (Lamont, 1994, p. 151). I tell students to Velcro their journal to their hip so they will be ready to record anything that catches their attention at anytime. They can use their monocular or they can simply record what they see and observe. They can write about a cat or a dog or a brother or sister. They can write about smells, tastes, colors, sounds...anything in their life at any given moment. I let them know that whatever they see and write about is unique and valuable. "...[A]uthorship does

not begin in the struggle to put something big into print; rather, it begins in living with a sense of awareness” (Calkins, 1994, p. 3).

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And from the very first day we work on ways to write what we see. While I want students to record their journal entries with what they experience, I do not want their journal to become a dull, boring list. Toward that end, I work very hard to teach students to “show” rather than “tell,” to use words in many different ways. One is by questioning students as they share their written ideas (See Appendix C of Webb, 2004, for a description of other effective ways to inspire good writing in beginning writers.). The goal of questioning is to spark more detailed information about the writer’s topic. I remember one student who shared this response with our class: “I watched my cat sleeping.”

My response was, “I need to see what you saw. Out of all the places in the whole world, I don’t know where your cat was. I can’t see your cat. So, where was he?”

“He was on the sofa in the TV room,” he told us.

“Great...now I’m getting a picture in my head. So, what did you notice about your cat as he was sleeping?”

The student had no response. He had not noticed anything specific, just that the cat was asleep.

“Today I want you to find your cat sleeping again and notice his fur as he breaths and his eyes as he sleeps. Look closely at his nose and his paws. Use your monocular! Write lots and lots of words about what you see and observe so that we can see, from your words, exactly what you have seen.”

In this way, we begin to learn to question one another...and this is a huge skill for everyone to learn. When students learn to listen to pieces written by classmates and then question each other to gain more details, the results are amazing. If the teacher asks questions of students about their writing, either during whole class sharing or in small groups, then students will begin to ask questions of each other. This phenomenon was first discovered in the study “How Children Change as Writers” done at Atkinson Elementary School in Atkinson, New Hampshire by Donald Graves, Lucy Calkins, and Susan Sowers. “When the study began, children at Atkinson, as in most schools, wrote rarely, and when they did, they wrote for teachers who merely corrected and graded the papers” (Calkins, 1983, p. 6). Webb summarized one result:

While this study began with the intention of observing and recording what happened as children wrote, the mere presence of the researchers caused the elements of what would be called Writers’ Workshop to emerge...Researchers talked to children about writing while teachers noticed. Teachers started talking to children about writing, using the same questions researchers used to question children. The children internalized all of it and started talking to each

other using the questions they had been asked. 2004, p. 164

Apparently, questioning becomes contagious once it begins. The need to know more becomes a huge part of what students focus upon, and the questioning extends to their own writing where they learn to question themselves in order to add description to their own pieces...a wonderful skill for standardized writing tests!

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A great way to enhance questioning skills is to teach students to truly listen to each other. Of course, they must regularly be reminded to listen, since they seem to shift into and out of 'listening' mode so quickly and so often. I tell my students to listen and pay close attention in order to create pictures in their minds. Often, after a student has read a piece of writing, I describe what I see in my own mind. Many times we laugh and giggle since words get tangled on the paper and ideas do not come out the way the writer intended them. And many times, if we really listen and create pictures in our minds, we can see holes in these imaginary pictures, holes we can then fill with additional writing, revising, and editing. By questioning the writer, we can fill the holes in our pictures and revise the writing at the same time.

To summarize, learning to question helps students learn to write with descriptive details and writing with descriptive details helps to put pictures in other peoples minds and all of this points to the need for lots of good words, powerful words, important

words. Our goal, at this point, is to learn to record the details so the reader can be there to see and smell and hear and sometimes taste the whole experience. In our classroom we keep ongoing lists of words on the bulletin board and we add to these lists with words we discover as we read and write. We have lists of smells and tastes and sounds. We have one whole list of words to replace the tired and commonplace "said" in dialogue. All these words can be used as students write and all of them add to the pictures we create in our readers' minds.

Being Heard as a Writer – Sharing Journal Entries

In addition to requiring daily writing, I also begin each writing class with 'share time' (I do this in an area in my classroom that is decorated with a rug and beanbags.). Students' excitement grows as they share what they have seen and written about in their journals. Writing needs an audience and 'share time' every day or several times a week keeps students excited about looking and writing. I limit 'share time' to 10 minutes or less because that time is for reading, not for telling; and students will want to tell their stories. When this happens, I stop the storyteller by saying, "Write that down."

The sharing time is for students to read their journal entries, followed by a quick, excited response from the teacher, or, occasionally, another student. I pop quickly from one student to the next in order to minimize the time taken. I call a student's name out, and the student quickly selects and reads one journal entry. Then I offer a quick, positive response before calling another name. The teacher must maintain control of this experience, especially with younger writers, in order to move the activity along. And since

sharing generates more and more ideas, students must be encouraged to write in their own journals during the activity. I get goose bumps when students listen and think and wonder and remember things from their own lives as they listen to their classmates read from their journals. As the teacher, I get to watch ideas expand and explode and multiply among the students, often as they scribble furiously in their journals.

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And sometimes...well, to be completely honest, many times during the first days of school...students have nothing new written in their journals to share. For this reason, I allow students to 'pass' during the reading time, but not over and over again. Writing development takes time and a teacher must walk the fine line between forcing writing and allowing it to grow naturally. Many times a little of both must be mingled together to jump-start student writing.

For example, one day during share time a young man had nothing written in his journal from the day before. I asked him what he had done the evening before and he said, "My mom had to go to the grocery store, and I just sat in the car and waited for her. I didn't have time to write."

My response was, "Oh, what a wonderful opportunity to 'people watch.' Next time get out your journal and write about the people in the parking lot."

Looking, I mean really looking, and writing about the result of that looking are habits, and as teachers our job fundamentally involves creating and nurturing those habits in our students.

As the days go on, we also need to judge our students' interest levels (or growing boredom levels, as the case may be), and periodically inject new ways of looking, new angles from which to see things, new areas to notice. Many ideas have come to me as I watched my students and listened as they talked about their lives and described their interests. And many times students will come up with ideas – "Why don't we all go home today and sit in a closet somewhere in our homes and write about the sounds and smells and sights from inside the closet." Or "Everybody sit outside tonight, just as it is getting dark, and notice the changes as the light of day fades away."

Of course, as all primary teachers know, picture books are also wonderful resources – In *Owl Moon*, Jane Yolen writes, "...the snow was as white as the milk in a cereal bowl" (1977). I challenge students to add description to their own journal writing by comparing what they see to something familiar (see Webb, 2004, Appendix C for more uses of picture books). The ideas involving picture books are endless.

Creating Poetry From Journal Entries

"When poets make a poem, one thing they have to think about before they can say it's done is how they want the poem to look and how they want it to be read" (Heard, 1989, p. 57). And when my students think they are ready to say that their work is "done," I know we are ready to move on to publishing. Thus, publishing written pieces from ideas

recorded in the journal is the next step in our writing class. Students are excited to write in their journals. They are excited to share what they have written and learn ways to make it better; but they also need to create final, polished pieces from their journal entries and poetry is an exciting and relatively efficient way to fulfill that need and to take their writing to the publication stage.

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I think of each entry in the journal as a “seed” (Fletcher, 1996, p. 30) – a seed that needs to grow. Ultimately, I try to be sure that the students “realize that writing begins not by sitting down to write something big, but by gathering small seeds from life, which later grow into bigger pieces of writing” (Webb, 2004, p. 83). So our next step is to take some of those seeds and help them grow. To teach this process to students I use the ideas of Georgia Heard from her book *For the Good of the Earth and Sun* (1989). Chapter 4 is titled, “Sound and Silence: Line Breaks and White Space;” and it works exceptionally well for this step in the process of creating poetry.

Actually, we begin writing poetry from journal entries during the first days of school using the ideas from our monocular viewing. Along the way we read and examine many poems so students get lots of ideas in

their heads about poetry, word choice, lines, spaces, shapes of poems, and the variety of meanings that authors might be trying to convey. One of my favorite collections of poetry to use at this point is *All the Small Poems* by Valerie Worth and Natalie Babbitt. The collection contains short poems about observations of small things in nature – things students might easily view with their own monoculars.

Here, in detail, is how we create poetry from journal entries:

1. Review journals for an entry or a few entries on the same topic that can be combined.
2. Type (in paragraph form) the entries on a computer, or hand copy them onto notebook paper.
3. Read the typed or copied version over and over, looking for places to divide it into the lines of a poem – look for pieces of meaning, which can stand alone on their own line.
4. Remember that this process is primarily to make the journal entry ***look*** like a poem. If using computers, students learn to click their cursor at the end of the first piece of meaning they find and then press “Enter.” This helps students learn how the computerized word processor creates hard returns and moves the rest of their entry to the next line.
5. On paper, students learn to do something similar with the slanted lines familiar to anyone who reads or writes about poetry. For the composing process, the lines must be recopied onto a new sheet of paper,

each block of text within slant lines appearing as a new line.

At this point in the process, students have a piece of writing that looks like a poem.

The goal here is to make this piece of writing that looks like poetry read like poetry. We want vivid and descriptive and powerful words on every line, words that “show” instead of telling about the topic.

Next, I teach another lesson from *Lessons That Change Writers*, Lesson 39, titled “Cut to the Bone.” The goal here is to make this piece of writing that **looks** like poetry **read** like poetry. We want vivid and descriptive and powerful words on every line, words that “show” instead of telling about the topic. At the same time, but without changing the meaning, I have students cut every unnecessary word. Finally, when students are ready, I teach Lesson 13, “Good Titles,” from *Lessons That Change Writers*. I want students to learn about the importance of having a title that conveys the essence of the poem. This lesson also teaches the difference between a simple label and a genuine title.

Moving on and moving ahead (or Where Do We Go From Here?)

I have learned that writing classes can go in many directions once students have experimented with the art of poetry. A few months into the school year I teach exploding a moment (Lane, 1993), wherein students learn and practice writing lots and lots of details about something that only takes a very short amount of time to actually occur. Then I move on to teaching the difference between

narrative summaries and dramatic scenes (Romano, 2000, p. 70). Essentially, with this skill students learn the art of showing a reader what has happened in a scene through description and conversation instead of telling the reader what has happened through summarization or a boring list of events. Along the way, we learn about writing and punctuating conversation. Such an approach provides the perfect opportunity for this basically mechanical topic. Specifically, I use Nancie Atwell’s “Punctuating Conversation” lesson from her book *Lessons That Change Writers*, (2002).

Further into the year, we apply all such usage topics toward writing and editing a memoir piece. Everything students have written before this has been short in length. Memoir is different. Additionally, I require students’ memoirs to be more than one typed page, divided into good paragraphs, and to include dialogue throughout. Once again, I use Nancie Atwell’s lessons on memoir from *Lessons That Change Writers* (2002) as a resource.

Along the way, throughout the school year, students will suggest other genres of writing. Since we read so many picture books, students will try their skills of writing their own original picture book. With the availability of computers, students are not limited because of artistic ability. They can combine computer art with their own sketching to produce original books. And I always have several students who have stories in their heads and invariably they ask me if they can write them! Naturally, I am thrilled when these stories appear in students’ journals. For some, it is the thrill of writing their own story. For a few, these stories go through a full revision and editing process to be included in the final portfolio.

Grading All Of This

I am now sure, after teaching for many years, that one of the requirements for being a great teacher involves what I call the finesse factor! [Students have to believe that what they are writing will be rewarded somehow; and to be frank, I finesse them into believing that everything they write will be graded.] Students must write in their journal, they must create finished, edited pieces, and they must accumulate their finished writing in a portfolio (a notebook with sheet protectors to house their writing). Additionally, I spiral bind individual books for each student at the end of the year. They do all of these activities, largely unaware that I actually grade only the number of pages they have written in their journal. Journal writing is the basis of all that we do. It is where all of those “seeds” are planted. If the seeds are not planted we cannot grow anything.

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I count journal pages once every three weeks and I count the grade I come up with three times in my grade book – my thinking is that three weeks worth of work should be counted three times. And I count the journal pages myself. I learned a long time ago that when I count and students count we come up with different numbers, especially if friends are counting pages for friends who have not written much. And there is always the issue of handwriting - some is huge and some is small. I feel I can be the best judge and settle

on a more accurate overall count that is fair to us both.

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*Nancy H. Webb, Ph.D., teaches 6th grade
English as a Readers'-Writers' Workshop
at Belle Heth School in Radford, Virginia.
Her doctorate work is in the teaching of
writing and teacher development. Dr. Webb
is also clinical adjunct faculty at Radford
University and at Virginia Tech. She can be
reached at nwebb@vt.edu.*
