

Empowering Student Writers to Use Their Voices Persuasively

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Traveling wearily through the wilderness of writing instruction, the young teacher spotted a fork in the path ahead of her. To the right, the path widened and appeared easier to travel, while the one to the left was clearly one that would require the careful attention of the traveler. An old, weathered signpost stood rooted between the two paths. Carved deeply into the post itself were the words “It’s just theory.” Puzzled, the traveler looked up to see that the arrow pointing right had the words “It will never work.” inscribed on it, while the one pointing to the left read, “How can we make it work?” Gathering up her books and pens, the young woman chose the path on the left, and it has made all the difference.

Like most high school teachers, I have bemoaned my students’ lifeless writing that simply brushes over the surface of the issue they claim to be discussing like a mist of spray paint. Students’ inability to write balanced, well developed arguments is a problem recognized nationally. Dartmouth professor Karen Gocsick (2004) addresses the problem in her web article “Teaching Argument to First-Year Students: Problems and Solutions.” She discusses how various Dartmouth professors, through their composition and literature classes, are working to solve student writing problems such as confusing argument with opinion, ignoring other points of view, and being unable or unwilling to address the complexity of issues. Carl Nagin (2003) also identifies these same weaknesses in secondary students’ writing in *Because Writing Matters* (p.23).

I, like many teachers, have been guilty of blaming my students for their bad writing. (It *couldn’t* be my fault, could it?) When in reality, given better instruction that equips them with strategies and sufficient time built into an assignment for thinking, discussing and developing their ideas, my students’ writing greatly improves. While the phrase *better instruction* covers a

multitude of areas, the importance of providing students with quality literature models and problem-solving strategies for understanding what makes these powerful pieces of literature worthy of emulating is something about which I have become passionate.

Years ago, as a beginning teacher, I naively believed that if students liked to write and had opportunities to write, they would become good writers. Disappointed by my students' lack of improvement after using this approach, I consulted a veteran teacher in the department. "Kids now days," she sighed. "It isn't like it used to be. Thank goodness I am retiring in two years." Little good that does me, I thought resentfully. I'm going to be at this for years. I need answers. And so began my career-long quest for effective instructional practices, a quest that has caused me to candidly evaluate the effectiveness of my lessons in terms of my students' writing. A quest that has led me to attend writing workshops, to seek membership in organizations like NCTE, and to read professional journals such as *The English Journal* in order to research what is working for other educators.

One of the most rewarding benefits teachers reap when they take time to read professional journals is the realization that we are not alone in the wilderness of writing instruction. How validating it is to read our own questions and ideas in print, voiced by other teachers with similar concerns. Such was my feeling upon reading Nancie Atwell's chapters on essay writing in *Lessons that Change Writers*. Atwell (2002), a well known and highly respected educator, writes that she knew "in order to write essays, my students first had to read them" (p.172). She too believes that the best place to begin is with real essays, not a prescribed formula.

For years now, like Atwell, I have scoured news magazines and newspapers to find well-written op/ed pieces for my students to read. How engaged my students become when presented with My Turn essays proposing that no student should own a vehicle in high school or that math

teachers should not allow students to use calculators until higher level math classes. These are issues that touch them, ones about which they have strong opinions. Their own writing, I challenge my students, should be as provocative and interesting to read as one of these essays.

Only in the last few years, though, have I begun to blend the reading of these pieces with writing instruction. Don Pedersen (2002) writes in his article “Question and Answer: Reading Nonfiction to Develop the Persuasive Essay,” how being part of a grant provided him the opportunity to research and decide to use nonfiction as a means to help students provide more specific support of their claims in their writing (p.59). My own revelation came as a result of discovering that Kaplan and *Newsweek* sponsor the My Turn Essay Contest, a yearly scholarship contest for high school students. Here was the perfect culmination of our study of published My Turn essays: students would write their own essays for a real audience with hopes of being published. An added benefit was that the parameters of the assignment were dictated by the contest guidelines rather than their English teacher.

About the time my students were working on their essays, I attended AP training on teaching close reading techniques to prepare students for the AP Language exam. It dawned on me that these same critical reading techniques are what my students needed to understand why those published My Turn essays worked so well. With a few exceptions, just having my students read good essays was not making them into proficient essay writers. They not only needed models I realized, but they also needed some direct instruction and a framework that would give them an organizational scheme that engaged them as readers and thinkers (Nagin, 2003).

And so armed with highlighters, pencils and a handout listing types of support and techniques such as concessions and qualifiers used in persuasive writing, my students and I reread those same My Turn essays. This time we searched for types of idea development,

qualifying words and any concessions the author used, highlighting and making marginal notes as we read. We asked each other, “How would the article be changed if this qualifier or that bit of personal experience were omitted?” As we worked our way through numerous essays, many students began to see for the first time how all those items on the writing handout worked to improve a piece of writing. Breaking down each part of the author’s argument to examine its effect on the reader made the craft of writing persuasively accessible. The next step would be for students to include some of those same types of support, concessions, and qualifying words in their own essays.

Reading teacher Carol Porter-O’Donnell (2004) writes about teaching annotation skills to improve her students’ reading comprehension. After one semester of using this writing-to-learn strategy, her students had improved their comprehension and openly commented in their reading portfolios that annotating had forced them to slow down and think more deeply about the text (p.85). She went on to state that when students use annotation to analyze the author’s craft, it changes their reading and greater connections are made (p.86). Interestingly, although O’Donnell had not taught the annotating and highlighting with writing in mind, her students voiced in their portfolios that the annotations they had made helped them focus their writing and improved the support they used.

Lori Mayo (2000) also found her students making connections between their reading and writing as she taught them how to do closer readings by looking at the author’s craft to determine how the writer evokes a particular response from the reader (p.75). She even found instances in her students’ writing where they had internalized the rhythm of a particular sentence they had studied and used that same rhythmic pattern in their own sentences. The key to this type of

connection seems to be having the students read texts they can imagine themselves writing and discussing decisions writers make as part of their close reading (p.76).

Don Pederson (2002) made use of the reading and writing connection to help solve his eleventh and twelfth graders' problem of generality in their writing. He describes in his article how he implemented a questioning strategy that gave students a sense of reader in order to anticipate the development needed in their writing (59). He realized that before his students could apply the questioning strategy to their own writing, they would need to practice analyzing pieces of persuasive writing for implied reader questions and how the author addressed those questions. Once the students had practiced the technique on numerous articles, he led them through the process of asking implied reader questions of their own thesis statements to identify what type of development they needed to fully develop their positions (60). By having the students practice the questioning strategy in different ways on successive drafts, he transferred responsibility for effective development over to the students, whereas students had previously relied on his comments to inform them of whether they had written an effective essay (62). Not only did students shoulder responsibility for development and revision, the papers he received were some of the best writing he had received. Additionally, students now viewed his final comments as reader concerns rather than teacher criticism (63).

Students who have made the kind of connections being discussed have internalized what rhetoric teachers call the communication triangle. They have begun to view writing and reading not as school subjects, but as related aspects of the communication process. The reader's needs and concerns become their own as they write because their writing is no longer just an assignment for the teacher to read and evaluate. It is a message to another human being. As

students develop this ability to read with the watchful eye of a writer and write with the listening ear of a reader, their writing will be clearer, better developed, and have an authentic voice.

Expository writing, difficult as it is for many high school students to master, is the one type of writing that students will probably do more of outside of public school than any other type. Additionally, many standardized writing tests ask students to address some type of issue by taking a stand and developing a persuasive argument in support of that stand. Most teachers would agree that merely assigning persuasive writing tasks will not ensure student mastery of the form. To be asked to do something alone with no teacher input is a test, not instruction. Yet, how many of us teaching today can say that anyone ever tried to scaffold writing skills for us. Our learning was, for the most part, hit and miss, trial and error, as we painfully tried to decipher the ambiguous red marks in the margins of our papers: *wordy, awkward, vague, needs development*. Although it is true that we eventually learned on our own, how much better off we would have been if a teacher had used great examples of idea development by published authors to teach us inquiry strategies that would enable us to “wrest appropriate support and elaboration from [the] content,” as George Hillocks, Jr. (2003) puts it (Nagin, p.56). Learning does not have to be mysterious or painful. Our students deserve to benefit from our own experience, not be doomed to repeat it themselves. We must carefully plan our writing assignments and provide our students with strategies that will empower them as learners. As George Hillocks (2003) has said, “One would hope that all writing teachers would begin to use this sort of thoughtful analysis of the writing tasks they teach” (Nagin, p.56).

References

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