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The Effect of Positive Teacher Response to Student Writing: The Red Pen Revisited

Bonnie Frechette

It was a typical Monday morning. I'd spent several exhausting hours over the weekend “correcting” student papers, tediously searching for and marking spelling and mechanical errors and writing comments and suggestions in the margins. Though sometimes unsuccessful, I'd tried to be sure to write at least one positive comment on each paper.

Returning the papers, I watched my students, noting the looks on their faces and their actions. Tammy stuffed hers in her folder without even glancing at it first; then she stared at her desk. Andy crumpled his into a ball and hurled it unsuccessfully toward the trash can. Becky skimmed the paper eagerly but hung her head when she reached my evaluation. Phil argued, “Ya, but I really tried. Doesn't that count?”

Beginning the week this way certainly was not fun for me or for my students; in fact, it was downright discouraging. I had to find a better way to respond to my students’ work—a way that would help them, reward them, make them want to continue in their journey as writers.

I began in the library. Using an ERIC search, I discovered hundreds of articles focusing on response to students' writing. As I read, three major approaches surfaced. The first,
providing only negative feedback to student work, suggested student responses I already knew: dissatisfaction and frustration. Negative feedback resulted in students writing fewer words per lesson and hiding their papers when they were returned. Students whose papers were full of errors marked by the teacher tended to focus on errors rather than the ideas as they wrote; there were no surprises here. Eric was one of those students. A poor speller, he also struggled with sentence structure; he wrote mostly run-ons. When I tried to "make him aware of his errors" by correcting his spelling and run-on sentences, he wrote less and less or didn’t bother with the assignment at all.

The second approach suggested including both positive and negative feedback in order to offer students both strengths and weaknesses, perhaps in a "compliment sandwich" approach. This made sense to me. For example, when Melissa wrote about her grandfather, I commented on the "good details of his physical appearance," suggested that she "choose more precise action verbs," and observed that her essay included "smooth transitions."

The third concept, responding with only praise or positive comments, provided the most positive responses in students. These students wrote more words per lesson, had favorable responses toward writing, felt happy to read comments on their papers, shared their papers with others, and were highly motivated and more independent than those who received only negative responses. Jennifer exemplified this student. When she wrote about a pet dog that died, she "used dialogue effectively," "explained the story clearly," and "included both sight and sound details" in her narrative. And she smiled when she read my comments and later asked if she could take her paper home.

I now had lots of information yet still felt overwhelmed and puzzled. How should I respond to my students’ writing? What was best for me, and more important, for them? Obviously all negative responses weren’t the answer; I’d allowed myself to fall into the trap too often already and knew the consequences. The all positive responses appealed to me; after all, who doesn’t want to hear something good about his/her work? I always appreciate positive responses from my colleagues and professors. So why was I hesitating? What held me back? I could hear the voices in my head already. “If you don’t mark misspelled words or errors, how will they ever learn the right way?” “You should mark every error on every paper. I do.” “You have to be told what’s wrong in order to learn it right.”

Still puzzled and somewhat overwhelmed, I decided to get input from those who had the most at stake—my students. Setting up my own research, I chose to test both the positive and negative feedback during the subsequent quarter. I would also attempt to balance the number and length of writing assignments for each quarter and the number/length of my comments on each assignment. At the end of the quarter I’d ask my students to evaluate their attitudes toward themselves as writers and toward their own writing. Since I’ve always asked my students to evaluate themselves at the end of the quarter, I needed to adjust my form just a little. The result was this survey:

1. I am a good writer.
2. I enjoy writing.
3. I enjoy reading my teacher’s comments on my essays.
4. I am willing to share my writing with classmates.
5. I have improved my writing skills this quarter.
6. I feel good about myself in this class.

And I began. It wasn’t easy for me to stay with my plan. Often I struggled to find a way to offer encouragement. I realized how much easier it had been to mark the errors. It was a challenge to find the right words myself, a valuable lesson for me. I worked hard, learning every time I picked up a story or essay to read.

Surveying my students for the first time, I found them quite positive about their writing and about themselves. Using a five point scale, they ranked lowest on sharing their work (3.05) and highest on enjoying my comments (4.35). Surprisingly, they didn’t disagree with any of the six statements on the survey and leaned toward agreeing and strongly agreeing with all of them. That was exciting news.

As I moved into the next phase of my plan, using only positive feedback, I gradually found it easier to respond only to the positive aspects of my students’ writing, though I still struggled with errors and what to do about them. The voices in my head diminished to dim whispers and at times were silenced. They were replaced with Tammy’s smiles and occasional chats with me about what she was writing or reading at the moment and by Andy’s prouder walk and more consistent efforts to try (his complaining had stopped, too). And
Monday mornings were a lot more fun.

At the end of the second quarter, I again surveyed my students. They were even more positive this time. A summary of all six survey items averaged 3.52 out of 5.0 for the first quarter and 3.77 out of 5.0 for the second. Their greatest improvements fell in the areas of improving their writing skills and feeling good about themselves in class.

Of course I still had students who were not more positive of their assessment of themselves. Some did not exhibit any noticeable improvements in their writing. And I still struggle with the results of this research. Even after confirming what I've read in others' research, I sometimes find it difficult to focus on the positive. At times when I'm reading my students' work, I'll slip back into that old habit of circling spelling errors or labeling a sentence AWK almost unconsciously. And at times I feel guilty when I don't mark the errors. In fact I must consciously tell myself, "You don't have to label the negative. Focus on the positive." The voices still whisper. In spite of these things, I still believe my classroom research was worthwhile. I've been reminded of both the value of and the limitations of reading others' research and carrying out my own. I've been reminded of the significance of my feedback to my students, especially the positive, and the impact I can make on them. What I write to them is really important. I can affect their attitudes toward themselves and their abilities, and I must be careful to work toward a more positive effect. Most important, as an audience for each of my students, I need to "listen for the sound of a human voice" (Hefferman, 1983) and respond to that voice as a human being who cares, who sees the good in that student, and is willing to focus on the positive.

Bonnie Frechette teaches at DePere High School in DePere, Wisconsin

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A Balancing Act

Thomas A. Lund

It wasn't long after I began my 32-year career as an English teacher in 1956 that it became apparent I was going to have to abandon convention and develop a system that would bring balance to my courses. The result is what I call the staggered curriculum method. It worked so well for me that I used it until the day I retired in 1988.

The method is really quite simple and in setting it down for you I am going to make one minor revision in it in order to accommodate the vagaries of education: I assigned the components of my English course—writing, oral presentation, and lit—to different days of the week. For example, my first hour class wrote on Monday and Tuesday, gave oral presentations on Wednesday, and did lit on Thursday and Friday. My second hour class wrote on Tuesday and Wednesday, gave oral presentations on Thursday, and did lit on Friday and Mon-
tion—adding words, phrases, and clauses for tone, clarity, et cetera (imbedding). I especially stressed “addition” because I believe it to be the most neglected of the four.

The first of each week’s two writing days was rough draft day. The second was final draft day, and on that day I would collect and evaluate. In other words, on each of the five days of the week I would have just one class’s compositions to evaluate, not an overwhelming task, but one I had to be faithful to. By year’s end each of my students had had roughly seventy days of writing and thirty-five or so compositions to show for it. What’s more, every piece had been evaluated and handed back the day after it was turned in. My system was nothing if not relentless. But, after all, teaching is by nature a relentless activity. At the end of the year I had my students compile their poems, essays, and short stories in a notebook in chronological order—an opportunity to get one last “A” based on neatness, completeness, and chronology.

Oral presentations consisted of minute-long book reports, heavy on critique, every four weeks, and two referenced presentations five or more minutes in length, one for each semester. I would have liked to have got the kids up in front of the room more often, but 120 students times 11 reports comes out to 1,650 stage appearances, which is about all an academic year will accommodate.

As for literature, every class was in a different lit project at any given time of the year, which, frankly, made my job more scintillating. One class in Copperfield, another in Connecticut Yankee, another in The Merchant, another in Romeo and Juliet, yet another in Pic-a-booc. That variety every week for 36 weeks. Not only scintillating, but challenging. Pic-a-booc? That was another innovation of mine. It consisted of programmed paperbacks, approximately 150 titles in all, in sets of two or more, each title with an accompanying job card entailing vocab work and a writing task based usually on the contents of whatever paperback the student had chosen.

My system, as with any system, has its drawbacks. For example, it is a little unkind to continuity in lit study. And it requires five preps per week the year round. On the other hand, it lends continuity to composition and oral presentations by spreading the two activities across the entire academic year. In short, staggered curriculum makes for a well-balanced English course, and what is more important, it gives the students that ingredient so lacking in today’s education—the ability to express themselves in coherent units of language both orally and in writing. Surely such an outcome is worth the added effort.

Thomas A. Lund is a retired English teacher in the Milwaukee area.

Works Cited
On Not Being (Too) Prepared For Class

Michael Hilger

I'm going to take a leap and suggest that teachers of introductory literature classes could do themselves and their students a favor by coming to class unprepared. By unprepared I mean that teachers should choose literary works they haven't read before and give them a quick, holistic reading—no underlining of key passages, or note taking, or background reading, or listing of questions. In other words, when the teachers walk into the classroom, they should be fresh on the material. Because you have probably all had nightmares about being totally unprepared to teach a certain class, you might wonder about the intelligence, not to mention the sanity, of a person who recommends an at least apparent unpreparedness as the best preparation for teaching literature. I don't blame you because I came to this bizarre opinion only after interviewing a considerable number of UW system English teachers, all of whom have excellent reputations and were willing to let me use the transcripts of their interviews.

Because I am the expert on literary theory of the Governor's Select Committee, I was chosen to interview UW System professors, with the stipulation I select people with experience in Secondary and Higher education who have their Ph.D.

To establish a context, I'll begin with the final report of the interviews by Professor George Enderwordt, a little known but very influential member of the early New Critics, who taught Governor Thompson's father at Georgia State U. The Chair of the Select Committee mandated that the eminent professor be the outside respondent to the interviews. I will quote from the beginning and end of his report:

"Reading the transcripts of these interviews was a not unpleasant experience for me because it reminded me of a time much earlier in my career when, if you will forgive me for putting it this way, I flirted with such a reader response approach as these interviews suggest. At that time a few English Education students would find their way into my literary criticism courses. These students would inevitably be drawn to Louise Rosenblatt during the two class periods devoted to reader response criticism. Their enthusiasm for this approach was charming and I had to agree it would be enjoyable to try if one were teaching in a middle school or high school setting. However, I was able to convince the Education students that such a simple approach required no great amount of study. Then we quickly moved on to the close analysis of individual texts, the foundation upon which all the more complex college level approaches to literature are built."

Then near the end of his report, the Professor, with, as I imagine it, his pipe wafting aromatic fumes, said:

"I will be a gentleman and not indulge in criticism of the individual interviews. The reader response approach seems to work for the kind of students they have to teach. I must conclude, however, by reminding them of the basic dictum for the teaching of literature. Rather than take students where they are, we must bring them up to where we want them to be. And that will always be, for the true student, the rigors of close reading of the text and literary research."

(I would be remiss to not mention that I shared some of the Professor's values before I conducted the interviews).

Although all the interviews were outstanding, I will focus on three of the most inspiring ones. As instructed by the Select Committee, I asked each professor to talk freely about the questions of the selection of literature for courses, the methodologies of teaching that literature, and the responsibilities of the teacher and student.

The first interview is that of Professor Rhonda Hipwell, who holds an important position in the English Department at one of the finest comprehensive universities in the System (I will not
name it in order to protect her privacy). Dr. Hipwell stresses the responsibilities of students and teachers. She feels that we must do everything we can to get rid of the old model of the teacher as seller and the student as consumer. Instead, and I quote, "We should adopt the model of a theatrical performance to convince the students that active and enthusiastic readers are really performers. The students, depending on the work they are reading, move freely between the roles of director or actor or set designer." In her classes students read the text out loud frequently: with prose fiction several will read dialogue or one will read descriptions of the central character's thoughts or the setting. Often the students break into smaller groups and visualize characters or do a group drawing of significant parts of the setting. If the class is reading poetry, each poem will be read out loud, maybe by the teacher or a student or the poet on a recording. Dr. Hipwell also has each student write several short poems and small parts of a short story or play. With all these activities, she gets across the idea that literature is alive and must be performed to be appreciated. Though she does everything she can to subvert the idea that any work of literature has a single or definite or right meaning, she notes that once the students begin reading like performers, they start to talk about meaning in some very perceptive ways. The recurring theme in Dr. Hipwell's interview is that teachers must encourage the student "to make something out of literature." She thinks that teachers who start the process by using their erudition to make something very big out of the literary work risk scaring or alienating their students. The process should start with the students and be complemented by the teacher as the confidence of the class grows.

In Dr. Hipwell's classroom, the students do much of the work. She chooses appropriate literary works and keeps things going like a director. However, she notes that it takes a lot of work and know-how to appear as though she is not too prepared.

The next interview I will discuss is that of Professor Curtis LeGrand, who for many years has been a respected teacher and activist at one of the finest comprehensive universities (again unnamed for the sake of his privacy). His main theme is the choosing of literary works. He criers out against "the tyranny of the textbook and anthology." He notes that because these collections have to sell, they all contain a large core of the classics and tend to be quite similar. In fact, a frequent complaint of students is that they read the same works in several classes. Dr. LeGrand is aware of this problem, but his main concern is that "these books stifle the sense of joy and ownership students have when they find their own poem or novel." Dr. LeGrand has to use the Norton Anthology of English Literature in one course, but he finds various ways to subvert the text. At the beginning of the course, he hands out a copy of the table of contents of the first edition of Norton and has his students do a short essay about the difference between the 1st and 5th editions. They find out that the male authors are approximately the same but the number of female authors has grown significantly, and, as Professor Curtis has indicated, "they came with some sharp questions and conclusions in those essays." He also assigns a research paper in which the students must find two authors not in the anthology and argue for their inclusion in Norton.

In his freshman level literature courses, he often has several students pick the works to be studied in the next class period and lets them take a specific role in teaching them. He also requires each student to go to the library and find a poem or short story in a magazine. These works are discussed in class and become part of the assigned material of the course. Dr. LeGrand makes these assignments because he feels that the "straight" use of an anthology, that is, works chosen by an editor and then rechosen by the teacher makes the students feel little or no control over what they're reading. Dr. LeGrand tries to convince his students that a "library can become its own giant anthology." He believes that the more students feel ownership of works the more they will learn from them. He also hopes that this process of finding good books to read will become a lifelong habit.

In Dr. Curtis LeGrand's courses, the students have to become involved and help structure the material of their, not his, course. Like Dr. Hipwell, he has to work hard to make his students prepare part of the course. He prepares, but does not overprepare.

The last interview I will consider is that of Professor Deborah Little, who is a professor of Education and literature at one of the finest (but also unnamed) comprehensive universities. Dr. Little, who used the reader response approach in high school very successfully, has quite smoothly worked it into her her university literature classes. She responded to all three of my questions. She
tries to choose anthologies and individual works that parallel what her students buy to read for enjoyment. This gets into adolescent literature which is something Dr. Little knows a great deal about and discusses extensively in her interview. However, since I know very little about the subject, we’ll move to her teaching methods, which are similar to those of Dr. Hipwell in that they encourage active reading of texts. She does a lot of small group activities so that “the students who wouldn’t speak with the whole class listening can have a safe place to express their reactions.” Towards the end of the class, each group shares their reactions to the work. This allows the whole class to see the varieties of meanings a single work can have. Dr. Little also has her students write some poems. She does this to convince them to read like a writer, looking for ideas or words or phrases they can use in their own poem. Reading and writing are two very active processes, and Dr. Little blends them very well in her literature classes. She advises against using a list of questions to start a discussion that will get the students to say what the teacher wants them to say about the assigned work. She notes that almost always in the group reports near the end of the class “they say everything she wanted them to say and feel especially good about it because they generate the ideas themselves.”

Again, Dr. Little’s students do much of the work in class and she orchestrates the activities. She prepares, but she does not overprepare.

As you can probably tell, I have been much impressed by the methods of these three professors, (and those of the other interviewees) and I will finish by discussing how my own teaching methods have changed.

I will start my conclusion by mentioning that I have taught introductory literature courses at Harlaxton College in England and Dalkeith House in Scotland. During these semesters in such intimate settings I got to know the students very well: one morning I barely held back the shower curtain from the vigorous pull of a coed. At both places I discovered that students are really, and sometimes terribly, afraid of literature classes. They are afraid of saying something stupid in class; they pray the teacher will only call on those few who volunteer; and they tremble at the thought of an essay exam. I know they have the same fears on their home campuses but there the system makes it less likely that the professor will ever learn of them. So the first reason I am so
drawn to the reader response approaches revealed in the interviews is that they all reduce the sense of threat students feel from the literary works and their teachers in introductory, or for that matter, upper level literature courses.

My conclusion is that not being too prepared or unprepared (as I defined it at the beginning) is just what I need. When I used the formalist (New Critical) approach which was at the core of my training, I would saunter into the classroom with an ironclad set of questions designed to bring the students to a penetrating understanding of the assigned literary work (that is the interpretation I built by reading other interpretations). Instantly, the students could sense it and would dig in. No matter how pathetic my requests for responses to the questions became, they held their ground for fifty minutes. Now, however, when I walk into the room unprepared because the students have chosen the poems for that class, they sense that I rather desperately need their help. This makes me seem agreeable and loveable because they respond immediately by reading from the poems, telling how something in the poem matches their experience and, near the end of the fifty minutes, discussing a number of possible meanings that I had decided to bring up, before they upstaged me. That’s the kind of class I’m very prepared to like.

P.S. I recently received a call from the Governor after he had read this essay. Let me just say that my days on the Select Committee are numbered.

Michael Hilger, a Professor of English at University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, is a member of Governor Thompson’s Select Committee for the Improvement of Secondary and Undergraduate Teaching of English in the State of Wisconsin.
Celebrating Literacy--
A Conference For Young Authors

Marci Siker

Promoting the use of process writing through the development and strengthening of authorship in young children was a major goal of this conference. Another goal was the desire to have young children meet and hear a noted author/illustrator share her techniques and story.

With this in mind, a small committee of Eau Claire primary teachers who shared a strong belief in the relationship between writing and reading began to lay the foundation for a conference for young authors. This would provide a time for children to come together to celebrate their writing by sharing their stories with others. The conference would also build community awareness of current trends in education. After much research and discussion, it was decided that a day would be set aside for young writers to come together to celebrate their accomplishments as authors and to meet a famous author. All students, rather than a chosen few, would be invited to participate in this day of celebration of literacy.

To be realistic in achieving our goals, we had to be objective about our population. Because Eau Claire is the center of a large school district, the decision was made to target only two grade levels and include all children in those grades rather than choose a few students from a larger number of grade levels through a selection process which would judge their writing. Thus the invitation to participate was extended to all first and second grade teachers in the Eau Claire Public Schools. Teachers who accepted the invitation to attend with their students also made a commitment to conduct process writing in their classrooms during the year. This would include the publishing of a minimum of one book for each student.

The establishment of a working partnership with the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire Elementary Education Department was another objective which was achieved by the Department sending volunteer students to assist the public school teachers in working with students and their writing; in return the University students gained insight into the writing process. These students also volunteered their services on the conference day to assist in a variety of ways. Another valuable benefit of this partnership with the University was their provision of the cost-free site for our conference in a large area of their Davies Center.

To reach our objective of bringing the schools and the community closer together, our committee presented our plans to many service organizations, as well as to our local school board. Meeting the public was of benefit to all involved: steering committee, school-related groups, and community.

With the above objectives firmly in mind, our teachers began their year of preparation by presenting Nancy Carlson's (our contracted author) books to their classes, discussing her style of writing and illustrating, and helping their students become familiar with her story characters. To aid in this instruction, the steering committee also provided a colorful author-information board to each participating school.

Children enjoyed learning to express themselves spontaneously in a medium which gave them such freedom, along with total ownership of their product. The writing, the oral language among peer groups when brainstorming, revising, and editing, the sharing of thoughts and ideas, the encouragement and camaraderie among classmates were all bonuses evolving from learning to write in a writing workshop. Our objective of involving more teachers with a commitment to process writing was readily accomplished.

The community and the school district became involved in many ways. Service organizations and businesses contributed funds so that this venture was completely self-supporting. A local television station and the local daily newspaper gave prime time news coverage and
Get Up Get Up. "When I was three I was in my first Christmas program. I stood next to a boy who sat down and would not get up. I thought it was my responsibility to make him stand up so, I nudged him and poked him and tried to pull him up I didn't do much singing that first program." Heather, second grade.
The day was divided into two half-day sessions. Approximately 700 students with their teachers and parent volunteers attended each session. Each session was divided into three sections with 250 students attending each section at one time. The sections included a half hour with Nancy Carlson, a half hour with storyteller Rob Reid, and a half hour for book sharing in small groups.

Perhaps the best summation of the contribution to literacy came when the conference plans were presented to the Eau Claire School Board, along with several published books by our young authors. The Board was amazed that children could be so productive at this age. There were some wet eyes and many positive comments about the Young Authors' Conference with its focus on the writing process and on literacy. The happy memorable day came and went, but the spirit of working together to promote the writing process and a literary environment has remained.

Marci Siker is a Chapter One Teacher at Putnam Heights Elementary School in Eau Claire, Wisconsin
Lacrosse Sticks, Leggings, and Language Arts

Marti Matyska

I looked around my classroom surveying the chaos. This was supposed to be a metamorphosis—not a mess. It was Christmas vacation, the beginning of the final stage of our grand plan to create a mini-museum at Menominee Indian High School. I kept telling myself, “Don’t panic. It’s just like the yearly trauma of building a prom set. It’s going to be beautiful; and, surprisingly, the students enjoy the work; it’s only the forty year old advisors who are frazzled out.”

The whole idea started when I took a course on alternative education and learned that, in alternative schools, there is an emphasis on developing social bonds to the school and to peers to that a good self concept develops. The thinking was that if you feel good about what you’re doing, you’ll do a good job. I thought that if that idea worked in an alternative school, then it certainly would work in a public school. My plan was to develop communication skills by building a one room museum with a life span of two weeks. I certainly did not expect to be standing in my classroom over Christmas vacation surveying a jungle of wires, masks, broken display cases, dead leaves, and thirteen still unidentified photos from the 1920s.

The seniors from my English classes and I had been working and researching for six weeks. After I received permission from our curriculum director to suspend “normal” activities, I introduced the idea to the class:

WEEK ONE: BRAINSTORM THE IDEA
What is a museum? Describe some of the museums you have visited. Introduce the idea of making a museum to celebrate the school’s anniversary. Discuss how museums are organized:
A. Chronologically
   1. Before the white man
   2. Indian wars and treaties
   3. Termination
   4. Restoration
B. Thematically
   1. The river and the land
   2. Male and female roles from past to present
   3. People, places, and things
   4. Basic human needs
C. Topically
   1. School
   2. Soldiers and war
   3. Housing
   4. Religion
   5. Leisure Time
   6. Daily life
   7. Work
   8. The Arts
   9. Celebrations
   10. Happenings

Decide on the general approach to be used. Divide the class into working groups. Visit the logging museum in Keshena. Invite a guest speaker from the local historical society from Gresham, Shawano, or Oconto.

WEEK TWO: GATHER THE INFORMATION
List all the possible resources:
School library, history and culture teachers, County Clerk for early maps, local anthropologist, elders or Menominee adults who don’t have to be famous; they can be older friends or relatives willing to share memories.

I brought in a small trunk of my family’s momentos, talked about each item as a museum specimen and set it up as a display. I did the same thing with some Indian artifacts borrowed from a friend. This way students could see what I expected from them.

Discuss the different types of photographs, how they should be handled, and the importance of dating and labeling them. List possible artifacts that we could use for the museum project and the feasibility of obtaining them.

I gave each team an artifact (junk from my barn) and asked the students to identify, evaluate, analyze, and interpret what they had.

WEEK THREE: LEARN HOW TO INTERVIEW
The class read an interview from one of Wiggins’ Foxfire books and discussed the types of questions to ask, which people to interview, how to make an appoint-
ment, and the importance of saying, "Thank you for your time." I interviewed a teacher's aide on how to make maple sugar which turned into a story on what it was like to go to school in the old days. Then we invited a reporter from the Shawano Evening Leader to demonstrate how to conduct their own interviews.

WEEK FOUR: PRESENTATION We visited the Neville Museum in Green Bay, and the people there gave us a behind-the-scenes view of a museum. We discussed ways to present findings: displays, slide shows, dioramas, video tapes, talks, experiments, music. The school yearbook advisor explained the elements of design. Each group submitted a plan, and we compromised on feasibility.

WEEK FIVE: ADVERTISING CAMPAIGN Decide who will be invited and how to invite them. Consider a grand opening event, flyers in lockers, posters, outside bulletin boards, letters, and church bulletins. In our case, all of the elementary classes in the District signed up to visit. The two local papers ran stories, and one of the three local T.V. stations came. We invited the school board to our opening event and invited the public to come on Record’s Day.

WEEK SIX: ORAL PRESENTATION Have the students prepare a talk on the project. Teams may work together; however, everyone must have a chance to talk and lead a tour. The expected audience is K-4. An outline of the presentation is to be filed with the teacher. Think up a list of hands-on activities that can be done by young children after they visit the museum. In our case, all the visitors tried an old Menominee game of chance, played a guessing game about Indian food, did a coloring sheet or a word search, and ate an ancient Indian food—popcorn.

WEEKS SEVEN AND EIGHT: BUILD MUSEUM AND GIVE TOURS People like to touch so security is a real problem. Out of the Senior Class Fund, we bought an old display case from a local store for $100, and all small items were locked up. One section of the room was roped off with plastic chain so no one could get too close to the very old items, and all photographs were reproduced by the Camera Club so that the originals could be returned immediately. Our displays included: a life size diorama of a maple sugar camp, a logging display of large tools, a photo display of old pictures with an invitation to identify unknown people, a slide show about eagles, large masks hanging from the ceiling, a video of old home movies from the 30s, one hundred year old clothing, and cases with beadwork, pipes, old books, lacrosse sticks, and leather Indian leggings.

WEEK EIGHT: EVALUATE THE PROJECT
A. The project will be evaluated on the following scale:
20 points...........the written interview of an elder
10 points...........photograph, artifact, or document
20 points...........two page typed-written report on artifact
20 points...........design for presentation
10 points...........log of what was worked on each week
20 points..........punctuality
B. The speech will be evaluated in terms of voice, eye contact, posture, and standard usage.
C. The ad campaign will be evaluated in terms of standard usage and mechanics.

D. Cooperation will be evaluated by the students using a checklist, monitored by the teacher.

The students of our school are predominantly Native American, so our museum reflected their culture. But I know the idea would work for other schools, and actually might be easier to accomplish. Other public schools would be more diverse, and the teams could be divided into cultural back-grounds.

The project was exhausting; as always there were successes and failures. We never did identify those pictures from the 1920s, and some students preferred normal English. I know I was happy to get my classroom back. But it’s been a few years, and people still ask me about the time the seniors made that museum.

Mari Matyska teaches at Menominee Indian High School in Keshena, Wisconsin.
"The Last Bellow": Something For Them, Something For Me

Stephen L. Fisher

Creative Writing, grades 11-12, Wausau West High School. The assignment: Choose one or more of the following fictional headlines and develop an idea for a story or poem. 
1. Dog Travels Four States to Find Owner
2. $100,000 Found in Shoebox—Widow Dies in Poverty
3. Student “Athlete of the Year” Declines Award
4. Mother of Accident Victim Protests Drunk Driving Laws
5. Apartment Dweller Dead A Month Before Being Found
6. Farm Hits Auction Block—In Family Four Generations
7. Couple Claims Child Delivered by UFO Physicians
8. Laid-off Father of Six Holds Former Employer Hostage
9. Disabled Youth Bags Trophy Buck
10. Last Timber Wolf in North America Believed Shot
11. Youth Vows to Hold Family Together
12. Stabbing Victim’s Screams Unheeded by Bystanders
13. Study Shows Children of Two-Parent Families a Rarity
14. Cuba Successfully Tests Photon Bomb
15. Gold on Mars!

The students in my Creative Writing classes always have the option to develop and pursue their own choices for their major writing projects, and usually they do very well using these self-generated ideas. Occasionally, they appreciate a possible nudge, and the above assignment attempts to provide that nudge. I received many good pieces of student writing from this exercise; for many of them it seemed to have captured their interest. It did more than that, though—it captured mine.

As I worked to put the list of choices together, I first decided that this would be a good activity to model for my students. But it was more than that. Number six on the list kept nagging me, compelling me. I realized that I had opened the door to my own idea for something that I wanted to write, something that wanted to be written. In trying to help my students find their voices, I had found mine. I re-read the “headline”: Farm Hits Auction Block—In Family Four Generations, and I remembered the experience of one of my relatives who had seen similar circumstances on the family farm. I knew then that what I must write would be more than a modeling device; it would be something for me.

I share my story here as one teacher’s small, accidental re-discovery of the deeply personal joy he found in writing something he needed... The Last Bellow

He stood very still; his eyes scanned the corn fields and the pasture in the distance. He thought of finding arrowheads down by the big spring, of turning over a shiny, mint-condition 1864 two-cent piece with the plow. He looked once at the “Violet Hill,” a rise of spruce and crab apple trees planted a quarter mile down the lane and tended by his father; quickly he walked into the barn.

The preparations were complete. He and his sons had swept and limed the floor and herded the restless and confused cows into the barnyard by the fence. They had changed the milking schedule so the udders would be round and full. Card tables and folding chairs, looking to him as though they were out-of-place toys, had been set up in front of the house. He had done all he should do. His work was finished.

Several local trucks and cars turned off the county highway at the bottom of the ridge and drove slowly up the dirt road, pulling onto the stubble of the newly cut field to the left of the house.

The men who had arrived earlier stood in small groups along the electric fence by the cowyard. Some broke away briefly and walked over to him and asked quiet questions; he answered tersely, not from rudeness but from simple force of habit.

The murmuring was jolted by a loud “1-2-3” when someone tested the portable sound system again. More cars had arrived. More men stood intently watching the cows, seeing in minds’ eyes one or more of them in their
new barns, adding what the men hoped would be many more gallons of the rich, high-butterfat milk for which purebred Guernseys are known.

"Well, it's one o'clock." He nodded. The men stood now in a big half-circle, as one of the cows, mostly brown with a long white streak running down her forehead, was led into the open area in front of them. He remembered when she had dropped one of her calves deep in the big woods on the far side of the pasture, and how many scratches from the thick patches of blackberries had laced his hands and forearms before he found her. He didn't hear the introductory remarks, but he was jerked back to the now, as the sing-song cadence of the auctioneer rhythmically cajoled the group.

He didn't know how he felt. Relieved? Angry? Sad? Beaten? Maybe all of them. Another cow, the one with the big hindquarters and the angry kick when the milking machine was hooked up, was sold; the price was over a thousand dollars.

He looked up at his seven children and their spouses; he thought of the belief he once had that one of them would carry on, would have the strength and the desire and the fortitude to run the farm as he had. One of his younger sons had initially given him hope. He had begun buying good dairy cows and even now owned thirty of those being sold. But the son had enrolled at the technical school, learning to be a power company lineman. When I give him his share of the auction money, it'll almost be like I'm paying him to leave, he thought, allowing a trace of bitter irony to tease him.

He watched his grandchildren. Some of them stood silently by their parents, while the younger ones ran around the folding chairs and stole sugar cookies from the big plates on the tables by the house. The last cow was brought out, docile and apparently unaware. Then she bellowed, loud and long. He smiled, just a little.

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From a teacher's viewpoint, the assignment was successful. The students read their writing with interest and pride, and I listened with similar feelings. The assignment seemed to have "nudged" myself and my students in creative directions; what better way to guide young writers toward the joyful voice of inspiration than having listened closely to it, even unexpectedly, yourself.

Stephen L. Fisher teaches at West High School in Wausau, Wisconsin

Writing for Kindergartners

Connie Jonett

As has been written by so many researchers and teachers, writing for an audience of one or two (the student writer and the teacher) or occasionally to be read or edited by the class or a fellow classmate causes stagnancy and limited expansion. Opening that written piece to non-classmates forces the student writer to write beyond the self and promotes more attention to details and the requirements of his/her reader. Probably the easiest and least judgmental audience to write for is one comprised of very young students, especially if the story is written about them. People generally like to read about themselves, especially if they are pictured favorably. The abundance of "me" books promotes this theory (Dr. Seuss and Roy McKie's My Book About Me, records and tapes that include a child's personal information).

As Lavonne Mueller and Jerry D. Reynolds state in their Creative Writing: Forms and Techniques Teacher's Manual (prepared by Jane F. Crouse), "Unlike students in many other classes, those in a creative writing course are there because they want to be, because they are interested, or at least curious, about how plays or poems, short stories or feature articles are put together and would like to try their hand at writing one of these forms" (vii). Armed with the belief that self-motivated students could write hero stories for kindergartners, my Creative Writing class of seniors was about to embark on a project quite unlike any writing assignment they had ever encountered. They were to analyze current forms of children's success stories, study ancient mythology, examine current-day fictional creatures, create their own
protagonistic and antagonistic creatures, interview a kindergartner, write an adventure with the kindergartner as successful hero, glue their stories into a blank-paged book with the kindergartner's illustrations, and present and read the hero story/book to the kindergartner.

A brief Roman/Greek mythology unit is helpful in familiarizing the writer with analyzing specific monsters or creatures. Children's books brought in from home or the library are also excellent sources for creating creatures. The writers are asked to discuss what stories they remember from their childhood, trying to isolate the elements that made those stories memorable. The movie "The Never Ending Story" can be viewed during class time, as it represents the main character (a child) as a successful hero that overcomes the loss of a parent. After viewing and discussing the movie, the writers are asked to create their own good and bad creatures, identifying good/bad habits, weaknesses/strengths, likes/dislikes, habitation, color, size, and personalities. It is important to note that the bad or nasty creatures should never be so frightening as to make its five-year-old reader afraid to open the book. Not only are the creatures to be described in written form but also sketched in an artistic manner. Some students may not feel very talented, but a gentle reminder that they are in a Creative Writing class because they are creative and the fact that the writer's only critic is a five-year-old who will adore any visual ornamentation to his book is usually enough stimulus to get even the most reluctant to produce.

Writers are then asked to sign-up for an interview with a specific kindergartner. The interview questions should be questions that the writers feel are pertinent and beneficial to their stories. Schedule a time to interview the kindergartners. Since the maximum amount of time needed for interviewing is minimal, the majority of high school teachers are complacent about excusing the writers for that time, which can be made up during the Creative Writing class hour.

Post-interview class discussion focuses on the writers' experiences. They should share various ideas for making their kindergartners heroes in the stories. Possibilities include the child defeating a Snorpin (bad creature) from eating the color red (the child's favorite color); the child making friends with the bad creature because it was lonely and therefore destructive; the child gaining confidence because of his/her experiences.

Writing is best done on a computer, since the writers will be asked to complete four drafts. Three key factors that are continuously emphasized are: remember the audience, the child must represent goodness, and continuously refer to the interview sheet, bringing as much of the child's personality into play as possible. If a writing block occurs, refer to the creature sheets or discuss with another student.

The first and second drafts are critiqued by other writers, followed by a reading done by the writing teacher. The third draft is consequently sent to the kindergartner teacher who is able to correct any erroneous situations (i.e. writing "parents" when the child is from a single-parent household). Prior to illustrating the book, kindergartners are asked by their teacher to select the available covers for their books. The blank-paged books are called Bare Books, available for about $2.00 each from Treetop Publishing in Racine, Wisconsin. Prices vary with the amount ordered.

The final draft will become the printed material for insertion into the book. However, the writers should first write a list of pictures that they would like the kindergartners to draw. It is important that the writer communicate exactly what they need from the kindergartner. "Draw a Gamoomph" will mean nothing to the child. "Draw a Gamoomph with a green body, short arms, fat legs, and a big smile on its face" gives the child direction. The child's name is put at the top of a folder with the list of needed drawings glued to the folder's front. These folders are then given to the kindergartner teacher. Two weeks should be allowed for completion of the pictures. Some children will only draw two or three pictures, which will need to be worked around when compiling the book.

Once the kindergartners have finished their drawings, the writers will need to make decisions about where to divide their stories to incorporate the pictures while maintaining suspense until the next page. A title and title page are printed on the computer. The title page includes title, written by (the writer), and illustrated by (the kindergartner).

After the books are finished, the writers submit a folder with the creature information, kindergartner interview, first through third drafts, and their books. If editing was done, that should be included also. The best reward of this project is returning to the kindergartner's classroom for individual reading and presentation of the book to the child. The child can color the exterior portion at a later date.
(Note: If markers are used for the cover, clear contact paper will prevent smudging due to handling).

It is difficult to give writing away, so many writers may wish to create a second book for their own keeping. This is possible through photocopying the kindergartner’s drawings. The writers may also ask to have their own personal Bare Books or may even wish to change the names in their stories to accommodate a younger child at home. It is wise to have an abundance of Bare Books available. One student summarized the entire experience with profound words of wisdom that one can only arrive at through experience: “Well, at least I know how to spell ‘kindergartner’ now.”

Connie Jonett is a Junior and Senior High School English Teacher at Stratford High School. This project was completed in cooperation with Jane Hafnbredl, Kindergarten teacher.

Sources/Materials


REMINDER:

1992 State Convention of the
The Wisconsin Council of Teachers
of English
Saving Students with “the Arts” in Language Arts
May 1 and 2, 1992
Paper Valley Hotel, Appleton, Wisconsin

Programs for the convention have been mailed to all members of the Wisconsin Council of Teachers of English. “Convention Registration” forms are enclosed in the “Convention Program.” If you need additional programs or registration information, please contact John Price, Appleton Area School District, P.O. Box 2019, Appleton, WI 53913. (414) 832 6141

NEEDED: Editor for the Wisconsin English Journal
After the the next issue of the Journal, the position of Editor will be vacant. If you or someone you know might be interested in the position, please call or write

David Schaafsma, Chair
WCTE Publications Committee
University of Wisconsin Madison
225 North Mills Street
Madison, WI 53706

If possible, David and the members of his committee would like to meet with each candidate at the Convention in Appleton, May 1 and 2, so please contact him as soon as you can before April 30.

It is 1932. The Great Depression has forced the Puckett family to sell their farm and move to a down-and-out neighborhood. Sarah feels lost and alone, particularly since she is singled out for bullying abuse by some of her new classmates. To make matters worse, her father, increasingly desperate because he's unable to find work in town, leaves to hunt for a job.

Sarah is a winner. She begins to sell her bread, first a loaf at a time, then, with the help of her mother, twenty-four at a time. Gradually, they build a small business, which they convince her father to join when he returns. The key ingredients to Sarah's success: perseverance, creativity, and a willingness to try the impossible.

While the rise from poverty may seem easy and too circumstantial to adult readers, the author provides enough support for events and characters to make the developments believable. Information about the depression adds to the substance of the books.


Readers familiar with Chris Crutcher's novels (The Crazy Horse Electric Game, Running Loose, Stotan) know that his subject is sports but his focus is character—characters with problems. Athletic Shorts, comprised of six short stories, follows this pattern. Some of the protagonists are new; others come out of the pages of his novels.

The hero of "A Brief Moment in the Life of Angus Bethune" is a football player; he's "incredibly quick for a fat kid" with superb anticipatory skills. His second "problem" is his parents; before his birth they separated to live with same gender mates. But Angus' more immediate concern is the Winter Ball; in a rigged vote, he's been elected king and the girl of his dreams is queen. The trouble is he will have to dance with her, alone; he doesn't know how to dance and his "fat and ugly" self-image makes him cringe with anticipated humiliation.

The characters of these stories are unique and dynamic. Their situations are compelling. Crutcher helps us to see inside the head of the athlete, inside any stereotype we might have.


Sally is angry. She's angry because her mother's cancer treatments have changed their usual summer beach plans and she must go to day camp instead; she's angry because her twin sister, Emily, appears not to be angry; she's angry at her mother because she has cancer. Sally is sarcastic, uncooperative, and belligerent.

Readers can sense—even before Sally recognizes it—that Sally's snappiness masks her fear and worry. Will her mother die? Will she get cancer, too? She feels alone, isolated from her family. The catalyst for change is a bus driver/former actress, Claire, who intriques Sally with her renderings of Shakespeare's dramas. Claire also lends emotional support and activates the reconciliation of the twins and the emergence of family communication.

This novel blends a problem situation and character development effectively. While revealing Sally's despair and her gradual self-understanding, it also expresses the varied responses to a trying situation and suggests coping strategies without being didactic.


The picture story format and illustrations are deceptive. The nature and scope of Lebek and its exacting illustrations will intrigue more mature readers.

Lebek offers both historical and architectural perspectives. It initiates with a 1000 BC settlement period, then the late eighth century AD, to the present, highlighting critical time periods/events in Europe. The focus is on the development of a fictional coastal city of northern Europe—several cities like Amsterdam, Hamburg, and Lubeck—are suggested models. For each period, a double-page spread gives an aerial view of the city site and its environs; this is followed by explanatory text and detailed close-ups of key features. These include boat and windmill construction, design of buildings and their interiors.

The text is concise and informative; it indicates historical sequence and suggests interaction of various factors of change from discoveries to inventions and wars. The illustrations are fascinating; their details express the nature and limitations of life. Indeed, a very effective presentation.

This is not your usual charming Christmas story, though it does evoke a sense of the Christmas Spirit. It is but five days until Christmas, but the Latimer family has made no preparation. In fact, the family is disoriented because of the recent death of their grandmother who had held them together.

Thirteen-year-old Nick narrates the events. He reveals the characters: his mother who is devastated and barely functioning; his sister who feels lost and unnoticed; and his father who is supposed to be serving a jail sentence but turns up to hide in the basement. Nick also reveals himself, his concerns and fears, his responsibility, and yearning for the celebration of Christmas.

Nick’s efforts to salvage Christmas do revive the spirit of this family. In the process, Nick takes measure of the needs and strengths of others—and of himself. He sees himself as an individual, not a reprint of his mother or his father though incorporating some of their qualities. At the end he takes a stand; we see the fitful sparks begin to glow. This is a book well worth reading now—and rereading next Christmas.


Life on the Planet Ceti is hazardous. The settlement gets off to a bad start when it discovers that the abundant jade plant, which was to be their basic food supply, is poisonous. And plants from earth wither and die in Ceti’s soil and its constant sun. The settlers remain dependent on another hostile colony, Arcadia. There is also the potential threat of the hlur, a native species sometimes poached for food; they exert a mind control over some of the settlers.

Both issues come to a head dramatically. After a hunting party succeeds in killing a hlur, several children of the settlers are “kidnapped.” Maya Gart, sister to one of them, sets out with Brock to locate them. Their contact with the hlur initiates understanding and reconciliation; it also leads to discovering the secret to survival on Ceti. This novel offers two faces—an adventure and a social-political dialogue. The issues and problems are clearly expressed. The hlur, too, provide moral and communal lessons. Also, readers will respond to Maya: she is assertive, independent, and compassionate, a worthy model.