

Getting to the Author Within

by Erika Daniels

Teaching writing to sixth graders early in my career was a test of self-esteem. It wasn't that they didn't like me; they didn't like the subject. Knowing that, I tried not to take the sullen looks, slumped postures, and negative attitudes personally. I stayed up late planning exciting lessons about writing topics that I thought were interesting; I tried to be a coach and not the sage on the stage; I implored the kids to try because they would need to know how to write for high school and college. Nothing worked. Then I read Nancie Atwell's *In the Middle* and Randy Bomer's *Time for Meaning* and began talking to and observing colleagues and realized that middle school kids didn't care about writing a college essay; they wanted to know how to write love letters to the crush of the moment. They wanted to know how to write a letter to the principal convincing him to change the school uniform policy. They wanted to write for purposes that mattered to them at that moment.

I moved to another district and another school where I had the responsibility of teaching ninth graders. . . bigger kids who had had three more years to learn to hate writing. Being the eternal optimist, I decided to see what Bomer's and Atwell's versions of Writers' Workshop would look like with my disengaged, primarily ELL, students. To my surprise, it worked.

The ninth grade writing standards call for students to write persuasive essays, autobiographical incidents, and technical documents among other genres. They also ask students to use precise language, to establish a coherent thesis, and to consider their audience, purpose, and context. Once I began to think outside the box, I realized that the skills called for by the standards are also necessary for young adolescents to use when crafting an argument to sway their parents or when expressing undying love for their boyfriend or girlfriend. The expectations for achievement are set by the state, but the vehicle by which I move my students to mastery is up to me. With that understanding, my writing classes are more fun for the students and for me.

When introducing each genre, I bring in examples of quality writing, and we unpack them. I ask the kids what makes each piece interesting or enthralling, boring or confusing. We identify specific elements of the craft the writers use that we can imitate in our own writing. With an authentic purpose always in mind, I can help my students find a reason to engage.

For persuasive essays, I bring in reviews on current films, and we study them in order to decide which are the most persuasive. We ask ourselves which ones influence what movies we want to see during the upcoming weekend. We talk about the difference between propaganda and persuasion so that the students begin to understand how much strol they really do have. Then they write their own.

Whether they choose to write a letter to the superintendent asking him to shorten our school hours or to their parents explaining why they should receive a skateboard for Christmas, I remind them to include the

elements that we found in the movie reviews that we identified as contributing to effective persuasive essays. Unlike my earlier experiences, I do not have to fight with the kids to get to work. I do not have 90% of the kids who are not on task. Because they choose a topic that matters to them and because they have read, analyzed, and discussed quality examples from the genre, they write with a purpose. They know what is expected of them, they have a clear idea of what the final product might look like, and they have a reason for writing. The writing task matters to them so they stop fighting me.

For technical documents, we read excerpts from *The Worst Case Scenario Survival Handbook* and discuss what the authors do in order to make the steps for survival explicit. The students don't realize that we are learning how to write technical documents because they are too interested in deciding if they would be able to escape from quicksand or to survive a shark attack based on the author's description. By the end of our discussion, the analysis of published writing has set the stage for our own writing. The students cannot wait to apply what they learned to their own survival guides or procedural directions. Their topic choices are always interesting, widely varied, and extremely unique.

When my principal asks how a power point presentation on "How to marry a Back Street Boy" or "How to play handball" contributes to the students' writing abilities, I let them do the talking. The students show him their multiple drafts and revisions based on peer feedback. They explain that sharing their initial draft with a partner and listening to his/her feedback about which steps are confusing and which create a good mental image helped them to become more coherent writers. He leaves the room shaking his head at our antics but impressed with the growth my English language learners have made.

Standards do not have to be the enemy. Yes, they give teachers specific genres to teach. Yes, they require all students at each grade to achieve at a certain level. Yes, they are often implemented in a way that kills students' love of learning. BUT, they are written in a way that creative teachers can still encourage their students to write for authentic purposes. My students often do not enter my classroom with a desire to write, to learn, or even to be there. I have learned that I cannot change the experiences that shaped their negativity, but I can work with them to unlock their enthusiasm by I listening to what interests them and thinking creatively about what the standards will look like in my classroom. When Whitney, a student who only attended school an average of three days a week, told me "I didn't think I could write, but now I think it's pretty cool," I know that I have made a difference.

About the Author:

Erika Daniels is on loan to California State University, San Marcos as Distinguished Teacher in Residence. She usually teaches ninth grade English in Oceanside, California.