

# Literacy Café: Making Writing Authentic

**W**hen a visitor enters my classroom during Literacy Café, he or she is quickly greeted by a student who explains what is happening and invited to join a group of students. Those students are reading their own writing pieces and talking about them. They might be commenting on what they like about an individual piece. They might be making a connection to something they've heard, or they might even be on a conversational tangent inspired by the writing. Regardless of the discussion topic, one thing is evident. Middle level students are actively engaged in sharing their writing without self-consciousness or fear of criticism. Although I love almost all aspects of teaching middle school, my favorite days are Café days.

## What Is Literacy Café?

Literacy Café is a celebration of writing in which students sit at tables, snack on refreshments, and share and discuss their work during informal conversations. We hold a Café whenever we finish studying a genre or writing a major piece. I bring in food, place tablecloths over the desks, and teach the kids how to talk about text even without a teacher being present.

Literacy Café grew out of my desire to help students publish and celebrate their work. It is not about judgment or evaluation; it is a chance to

share finished writing with classmates, teachers, administrators, and family. It takes place after the difficult, messy work of writing is complete, and we are ready to publish our products. It is the most unstructured part of our year in that students sit with whomever they choose, move from group to group as they finish conversations, and facilitate their own discussions about their texts.

## Preparations for Café

Café days occur after each genre of writing is completed. During any given four- to six-week period, we learn about a specific writing genre by reading quality professional examples, talking about what makes them effective, planning for and drafting writing, and conferencing about original writing. Once their genre pieces are finished, we celebrate at Literacy Café. To prepare them, I mention Café throughout the preceding weeks so that students become excited. The night before, I go to the market for snacks—grapes, bagels, juice, and other reasonably healthy treats. My purpose in providing food is to make the day feel more special than a typical school day. The morning of Café, I rearrange the desks or tables (depending on my classroom) into groups of 2, 3, or 4, put tablecloths and flowers on them, and make copies of the students' final drafts. Once the students enter, the fun begins.

## Preparing the Students

When we invite guests to our Literacy Café (teachers and administrators on my part, family members by the students), we ask them to arrive 15 minutes after the start of class. That way, I have time to prepare the students and remind them of behavioral expectations. I tell them that they may

join any group they choose and stay for as long as they want. They should listen to a classmate read his/her writing and then engage in one of the comprehension strategies that we know good readers use—make a connection, ask a question, summarize what they heard, etc. When the conversation begins to die down, they may excuse themselves and join another group in order to repeat the process. When a new person joins their group (adult or student), they need to welcome the newcomer and explain what they were talking about.

As for the refreshments, I tell them that anyone may go to the food table at any time as long as there are no more than two people at a time at the table. If they want to get refreshments, they need to excuse themselves from their group before leaving the table. We make jokes about how adults do not elbow each other out of the way for food at meetings, and we shouldn't do it, either. The first Café day is always a little shaky, but I expect that and use their sometimes less than desirable behaviors as jumping off points for our "day after" discussion.

### What Café Looks and Sounds Like

To an outside observer, Literacy Café might look unstructured or without purpose. To active participants, however, it looks like engagement by students in serious discussions about their own writing. The noise level in the room rises and falls with laughter and exclamations. When one or two students in a group want to hear other texts, they excuse themselves from a group and join a different one. I try not to direct them because I want them to learn to monitor their own behavior. As you might expect, it takes a lot of discussion about how to make good choices and a lot of practice in the early months of the school year, but the listening and speaking practice is worth it.

At first the students do not know what to expect, and they often focus more on the "café" than on the "literacy" part of the name. After one or two Café experiences, however, they realize the food is a nice treat, and the tablecloths are a nice change, but the real excitement comes in sharing their own writing and talking about each other's pieces.

### Recommendations

Over the years, I have learned some important lessons for making Literacy Café successful.

- Spend as much time as necessary establishing and reviewing behavioral expectations.
- Do not be afraid to "pause" Café if students need to be refocused.
- Model how to react to and talk about both student and professional texts.
- Emphasize that Café is about sharing and talking about writing; it is one way to publish final drafts.

### Why It Works

One of the reasons the students come to enjoy sharing their writing is because they have learned how important writing is to their learning and to their lives. Because we spend so much time conferencing about our writing during the drafting stage and learning about the give-and-take of mature conversation, my students are prepared to participate in Literacy Café. Since we also spend considerable time learning and practicing what good readers do, the students enjoy putting their comprehension strategies to work with their own texts. Realizing that their writing can be read in the same way as professional writing is a powerful motivator.

The way students feel about Literacy Café is best illustrated by their own comments:

- "I liked Literacy Café because we got to read people's stories and talk about them."
- "In Literacy Café, we had a chance to share what we think and know about writing."
- "Literacy Café was cool because it made us feel like real writers or something."
- "I liked when we had our Literacy Café

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because I got to read other people's writing instead of mine all the time."

Literacy Café only works, however, if students have quality writing to share. This comes through using writing as a tool in the classroom as well as explicitly teaching the craft.

## Using Writing as a Learning Tool

Literacy Café works because it meets young adolescents' needs for social interaction (Daniels,

2004). Sociocultural theory reminds educators that students elicit meaning from contexts based on the language used and the actions of people within those contexts (Gee, 1999). Students in middle school learn what speech and actions identify them as accepted participants in their environment. They have a deep need to feel accepted by and connected to their peers (Perlstein, 2003).

Through Literacy Café, young adolescents have an opportunity to interact with peers, share their work, and feel that their voices are being

### SIDE TRIP: MAKING WRITING AUTHENTIC THROUGH THE LITERACY CAFÉ

"Do we have to do this again?" "This is so boring!" Middle school students are often not tactful in letting their teachers know just how much they dislike writing. Often, teachers have to work hard at gaining their students' trust before they are rewarded with well-written papers they can brag about. In "Literacy Café: Making Writing Authentic," the author illuminates for us just how possible this can be. When students are taught to write in a caring and nurturing environment, they learn to maximize their writing potential and to enjoy writing.

The Literacy Café is a place where students are engaged in reading and discussing their writing without self-consciousness or fear of criticism. It is also a means of celebrating students' writing successes. As the students come to realize that the celebration is not just about food and the chance for a class party, they take pride in writing their deepest thoughts and sharing with their peers and teachers. Their confidence is strengthened as they receive positive feedback.

The author posits that in order for students to enjoy sharing their work, they have to be taught how to write. Teachers should demonstrate effective and ineffective strategies of writing. They also need to incorporate real-world needs and experiences in the classrooms to create meaningful experiences for

their students. Further, teachers need to expose their students to quality examples of diverse writing genres and teach them to write in these varied genres. When teachers teach their students the real art of writing and how to enjoy their writing, they create individuals who learn to appreciate themselves as writers.

#### Resources for Teaching Writing

Atwell, N. (2002). *Lessons that change writers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Atwell, N. (1998). *In the middle: New understanding about writing, reading, and learning*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Calkins, L., Hartman, A., & White, Z. R. (2005). *One to one: The art of conferring with young writers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Dean, D. (2006). *Strategic writing: The writing process and beyond in the secondary English classroom*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

ReadWriteThink. This is a comprehensive website that provides educators and students with a plethora of resources in reading and language arts instruction. <http://readwritethink.org/>.

—Ruth Lowery

heard. Café days also show students that writing matters and plays a vital role in our classroom. It matters so much that we take several days a year to sit and talk about what we have written recently.

Sociocultural theory holds that being a member of a social or cultural group requires an understanding of the words, actions, and tools in use (Gee, 2001). Literacy Café allows students to practice using more formal language with their peers in the hopes they will feel more comfortable navigating between adolescent and academic worlds.

Elbow (2004) maintains that learning is the construction of meaning. If middle level students can learn to use writing in order to construct that meaning, they can wrestle with ideas and figure out what they think through writing. "Writing tends to imply 'get in there and *do* something . . .' and asks 'what do *you* have to say?'" (Elbow, 2004, p. 10). Young adolescents have a strong need to *construct* their own meaning as opposed to merely consuming information (NMSA, 2003). Writing allows them to create their own understandings about academic concepts as well as their feelings and beliefs.

Writing used to be the way that students showed me what they had learned. I did not ask to see rough drafts; I did not understand the value of journals or learning logs. Because of my emphasis on final draft writing, I was depriving my students of a valuable learning experience. Instead, writing can and should be used to jumpstart conversations between students and teachers (ASCD, 2003). By asking students to write down what they think about a topic or subject, teachers encourage their students to think critically instead of merely memorizing facts (ASCD, 2003). Writing an opinion on a topic and supporting that opinion with relevant facts requires a deeper level of thinking and understanding than does rote memorization. Langer and Applebee (1987) found that writing forces the learner to think about the relationships among ideas, which leads to more complex understandings of those ideas. Writing is not only the product; it is part of the process.

Until teachers make it okay for students to use writing as a learning tool, however, we will

continue to face reluctance in writing. If I make my students believe that writing is a means for them to show me perfection or that it is only a culmination of learning, I am doing them a disservice. Stowell (2004) says that "writing enables us to find out who we are and communicate that to others" (p. 6). Finding out who we are requires the courage to face hard truths and make difficult choices. Writing is a tool to help us in our quest of self-discovery, but it's a complex task. I need to help my students see that writing is messy, complicated, and above all, purposeful.

Privileging writing has another benefit. It shows middle level students that they do have a voice. Too often our young adolescents feel powerless and lost as they navigate the sea of puberty. Middle school can be a scary place for the kids who do not make easy connections to teachers or other students. Writing shows students that words "can pierce the heart and change a life, and to wield words well is extraordinary power" (Rubenstein, 2000, p. 10). It gives them a productive, powerful way to make themselves heard. When Carlos, a former student, wrote about his anger issues and his grief that his brother was living in another state, I saw him in a new light. I was more sympathetic to his struggles, and he felt less isolated. He still did not behave all that well, but he was less likely to openly defy me. By reaching out through writing, Carlos found his voice.

### Teaching Writing

Early in my career, I made sure my students spent a lot of time writing. I assigned topics, gave them time to write, and collected essays, poems, and stories on the due date. To my chagrin, however, the writing my students turned in was often mediocre and uninspired. To make matters worse, I never saw much improvement in the pieces they wrote in June compared to their September work.

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Why weren't my students moving forward as writers?

Through graduate school courses, conferences, research studies, and talks with colleagues, I realized I had been making two major mistakes. The first was that I was confusing *assigning* writing with *teaching* writing (Fearn & Farnan, 2000). Although it was important to assign a variety of writing genres in English class, I actually had to

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teach students the craft in order for their writing to improve. I finally understood that students must be exposed to high-quality examples of the genre they are asked to write. They must also learn to unpack those quality examples. If teachers and students analyze what makes a piece effective or ineffective and can specifically identify those el-

ements, writing improves. It improves because the young writers understand exactly why a piece of writing is considered to be quality *and* they know how to replicate those elements in their own work.

Hamby (2004) found that when students are explicitly taught how to write, their writing improves. Teachers need to spend time teaching students how to craft a compelling introduction, how to paint mental images with words, where to put periods and commas, and all of the other skills professional writers use every day. When we engage in this kind of specific instruction, students' writing becomes more powerful. They are better able to achieve their writing purpose. This probably seems obvious, but for a long time, I thought I *was* teaching writing when I gave writing assignments followed by feedback on final drafts. And I suspect that I was not alone. Hamby's work shows that writing needs to be made more visible. When I actually showed my students what was happening in my brain while I wrote and directly taught them how to write, their writing improved. Good writing does not just happen.

I changed my practice in another way that led to improved student writing. In addition to teaching writing directly and explicitly, I broadened my understanding of what prewriting looked like. Writers are constantly thinking about what they are writing. If they're between pieces, they are continually alert to what they may write next.

Planning can take the form of bubble clusters or outlines, but it can also occur in conversations or at the lunch table. Planning happens while walking down the street, waiting for a bus, or watching television. Bomer (1995) is one of many writers and writing teachers who advocate the use of a writer's notebook. Encourage students to pay attention to what they see, hear, and experience. Write it down. Any casual observation may be the germ of a larger writing piece. Teach students to look over their entries and find themes. Those themes can lead to beautiful stories, essays, and poems. Above all, allowing students to talk and think about their ideas before putting them down on paper improves the overall quality of the writing (Dahl & Farnan, 1998). During Literacy Café, some students find ideas for their next piece of writing.

I remember one student, Gustavo, who never began an assignment at the same time as everyone else. Long after all of his classmates were busy writing and conferencing, Gustavo was staring at the walls or the ceiling, tapping his pencil on his lips. Because he had a habit of not doing much work in any subject, I always went straight to Gustavo to find out why he wasn't writing. More often than not, he would snap, "I'm thinking!" and go back to staring blankly. Although the teacher in me wanted to get angry about the apparent lack of work, the writer in me understood that "thinking" is just as important to writing as putting the pencil to paper.

After our first such exchange, my next minilesson was a think-aloud. While the class watched, I voiced my thoughts as I wrote a rough draft. Everything I was thinking as I wrote came out of my mouth. I wanted my students to understand that writing is hard work. The words do not magically appear. From that point on, I modeled

my thinking every time I wrote in front of the class. When I crossed out words or phrases, I explained why. When I did not know what to write next, I let my students in on that little secret. I hoped that students like Gustavo would take my lead and use “thinking” as more than just a stalling strategy.

For the most part, it worked. Gustavo, more often than not, put pen to paper after adequate thinking time. While he never became a model student, he did complete most writing tasks and participated in Literacy Café as both author and audience. I hope that part of his increased effort was due to learning that thinking and planning are just as important as the physical act of writing.

### Finding Authenticity

Writing is not just a school task. In the world of work, people write all the time for a variety of reasons. We write emails to colleagues, we write memos to employees, we write reports or proposals. Unfortunately, not many people are writing well. A recent study found that states are spending nearly a quarter of a billion dollars on remedial writing instruction for their employees (Pope, 2005), and that is just in the public sector. The cost to the private sector is incalculable in terms of lost productivity and good ideas gone unnoticed. When I share these facts with my students, they fight me a little less. I show them that writing can be financially rewarding, and people in the “real world” expect high-quality writing. Writing matters beyond the classroom walls.

Students are motivated to write when they believe their writing has an authentic purpose or if they have a compelling need. In the “real world,” we write lists to guide our grocery shopping and letters to keep in touch with loved ones. We write in journals to work through our emotions. We write letters to politicians to express our views. Writing keeps us in contact with our communities. When parents or community members attend a Literacy Café, the students realize that writing is valued beyond the teacher’s desk.

When I assign a writing task to my students, I am prepared for the inevitable torrent of “why do we have to do that” questions. If I didn’t hear it, I

would worry. My students must not be listening! As adults, we rarely write because we are told to. We write because we have a reason, and the reason provides urgency and a desire to “get it right.” We ask for feedback from trusted friends or colleagues, and we struggle over the words until we hit on just the right combination. When we write for the public, we know that we are being judged on how we say it, not just what we say (Rubenstein, 2000).

I want my students to understand that their abilities and intellect are judged by the way they communicate with the world. If they fill out a job application with misspellings and grammatical errors, the employer will quickly move on to the next one. If they write a college application essay with no voice or purpose, they may receive the dreaded “thin letter” as a response. I try every day to teach my students the skills they need to write well. Finding authentic reasons for our students to write helps them feel this urgency, too.

In my classroom, my 6th- and 8th-graders have many reasons to write. We write to our military to thank them for their service. Since we are close to a military base, this writing takes on special meaning; many are writing to their own parents or the parents of friends. We write for various competitions for which the primary motivator is the monetary prize. We write for each other because of the chance to share during Literacy Café. They anticipate the time spent quietly talking about each other’s writing. As Jasmine said, “My favorite part was (I bet you think I am going to say food but no) it was when I read my article and everyone liked it.” Writing is authentic when the writer feels compelled to share it or when he or she has a personally relevant purpose.

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### Final Thoughts

Both writing and teaching writing are difficult endeavors. When I read Nancie Atwell’s *In the*

*Middle* (1987), my whole approach to writing changed dramatically. Through her examples and suggestions, I began to recognize the importance of teaching students something about the craft and then giving them time to write. I still struggled with many of her maxims, however. In Atwell's first edition, she said minilessons should last no longer than 5–7 minutes. Mine often did. It was too difficult to teach some writing skills without taking more time for examples and questions. Atwell also

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learners who were timid about voicing their fledgling English.

Thus Atwell's second edition (1998) came as a great relief. All of her previous "rules" were now considered suggestions. They were meant to offer guidance and a way in to teaching writing effectively. In effect, she told readers it was okay to take her ideas and make them their own.

Once I began to replicate real-world needs and experiences in my classroom, my middle school students' writing gained authenticity. Once I began to expose students to quality examples of genres and to teach them how to write in those genres, their writing improved. Once I began to really listen to what the students told me through their writing, they found a reason to write.

I began this article with a description of a typical Literacy Café. It occurs a few days a year to provide a non-threatening way to share writing and prepares students to more widely disseminate their pieces. Although Literacy Café is the only "new" idea I share in this article, I believe that reflecting on and adding to current best practice moves us all forward in our work with students. My hope is that by situating Literacy Café in the larger context of learning and social constructs, this article contributes another element to what we know about effective writing instruction.

told teachers never to read student writing to them during conferences. The author should read his/her own work to the teacher. This did not always work for my English-language

The real work of writing happens every day as we think about issues that matter to our middle school community and wrestle with ways to share those ideas in writing. A recent student told me that now he is always thinking about writing and what he is going to write in class. In a world of fast-paced television, ever more engaging video games, and constant visual stimuli, that is a compliment that I will happily accept.

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## Candidates Announced for Middle Level Section Elections; Watch for Your Ballot

The Middle Level Section Nominating Committee has named the following candidates for Section offices in the NCTE spring elections:

**For Members of the Middle Level Section Steering Committee** (one to be elected; term to expire in 2011): **Lauren R. Hurst**, Ottawa Hills Jr./Sr. High School, Toledo, Ohio; **Nancy Patterson**, Grand Valley State University, Grand Rapids, Michigan

**For Members of the Middle Level Section Nominating Committee** (three to be elected; terms to expire in 2008): **Carol Werthmann Bedard**, University of Houston-Downtown, Texas; **Elizabeth Close**, consultant, Albany, New York; **Lori Atkins Goodson**, Wamego Middle School, Wamego, Kansas; **Joan Jennings**, Spring Branch School District, Houston, Texas; **Ruth McKoy Lowery**, University of Florida, Gainesville; **Katherine Davis Ramsey**, former English language arts teacher (retired), Harlingen, Texas

Members of the 2006–07 Middle Level Section Nominating Committee are Sheila Newell, Jane Long Middle School, Houston, Texas, Chair; Linda Schink, Windsor Middle School, Imperial, Missouri; and Judy Wallis, Spring Branch School District, Houston, Texas.

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