Title: Transforming Young Writers' Attitudes toward Writing and Becoming Writers

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Abstract
This article discusses a National Writing Project Young Writer's Camp for students in grades four through twelve with initial varying attitudes and writing experiences and how "campers" attitudes and beliefs about writing and their own identities as writers were transformed over two weeks. Based on matched pre- and post-surveys, students showed a positive change in response to ten statements related to attitude toward writing. While two weeks is a short amount of time, the findings suggest that in an effort to raise test scores and school API ratings, teachers have moved away from the well-tested foundations of writing instruction (student choice, revision, writer's craft, publication, and authentic assessment) which showed a profound positive effect on the quality and quantity of the texts produced by the Young Writers. The authors argue that the writing activities done in the camp are possible in K-12 classrooms and that a reconceptualization of writing and writer identity is desperately needed in today's classrooms.

Transforming Young Writers' Attitudes toward Writing and Becoming Writers

Matthew Brown, Jodene Morrell and Kathleen Dudden Rowlands

Donald Graves begins his seminal *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work* with these words:

> *Children want to write. They want to write the first day they attend school. This is no accident. Before they went to school they marked up walls, pavements, newspapers with crayons, chalk, pens or pencils...anything that makes a mark. The child's marks say, "I am" (3).*

Pleasure in writing, Graves found, is something children bring with them to school on the first day. The markings they have made ever since they could hold something with which to mark are one way they assert their presence in the world. When they arrive in their first classrooms, however, things change dramatically. The way writing is taught in schools, Graves argues, not only denies these young writers their identities as authors, it kills the pleasure of self expression.

Graves was writing in 1983. Similar lack of engagement and motivation continues today. Indeed, students' attitudes toward writing generally worsen as they move from grade to grade. Kindergarten and first grade students, asked what they like to do in school, often mention reading and writing. Yet by fourth grade attitudes about reading and writing "are often less than positive" (Paquette,1). Lack of confidence and related writing anxiety often haunt students throughout their high school careers, following them to the university and beyond (Baez).

We also know that attitudes, beliefs, and motivation play a significant role in students' literacy learning (Bottomley, 286). Albert Bandura's work helps us understand how individual perceptions of competence develop and strengthen what he calls self-efficacy: the ability to cope, to expend effort, and to persist when confronted with "obstacles and adverse experiences" (191). Students who believe themselves competent writers are more likely to "pursue opportunities to write, expand more effort writing, and demonstrate greater persistence in seeking writing competence" (Bottomley, 287). Conversely, students who view themselves as incompetent writers are less willing to engage fully in writing tasks (Spaulding).

This is a crisis. Adult literacy and schooling are positively correlated with individuals' employment and earnings, which can have a profound impact on quality of life (Reder, 2010). However, in school we often neglect to focus on the emotional impact that daily writing has on the life of the child. Lucy Calkins tells us, "Teach the writer, then the writing." Although we might expend a great deal of energy trying to teach writing, unless we turn our attention to teaching students to be writers--comfortable and confident in their abilities to deal with the messiness and complexities of authentic writing tasks--it is quite likely that we will have little real impact on student writing development.

A Young Writer's Camp should be about developing self-efficacy. Like many Young Writer's Camps offered by Writing Project sites nationwide, at Cal State Northridge we explicitly attend to that human urge to mark the world. Unconstrained by performance needs imposed by benchmarks and state tests, we offer control to our young authors. We can allow for experimentation. We can provide students with opportunities to write for real purposes in authentic social contexts. We can let them--indeed encourage them--to play with written language.

Our workshop periods focus on developing student engagement with writing. This requires intrinsic motivation, positive affect, persistence, effort, and self-confidence. The writing tasks are authentic. By the end of camp, each student publishes at least one piece in the camp publication. During the last day of camp, they read one piece to peers, friends, family members. They craft pieces that communicate, engage, and move their readers or listeners. Even youngsters enrolled by zealous parents understand that their writing is for them first, and for others later. How do we do this? How do we know we've done it?

Background of Young Writer's Camp

Students in grades four through twelve join us for our two-week Young Writer's Camp. Using titles to capture the writing experience for each grade level group, our basic camp structure offers three classes. Students in grades 4 and 5 are "Discovering Your Writer's Voice," grades 6 through 8 are "Developing Your Writer's Voice," and our high school students are "Writing with an Attitude." While the lower grades primarily engage in more creative writing, all the writing done in class is purposeful. We want students to see that writing is fun and can be used academically. More importantly, we want to give our students something they may never have experienced as writers--success!

The most important part of the camp experience comes at the end when students receive an anthology of work submitted for publication, and when they gather in the auditorium. With family members and friends watching, they read a selection of their writing.

Our camp experience can easily mold itself to new dates, times, and locations because the basic foundations behind the work that we do does not change. Our beliefs about writing instruction transcend any organizational structure and are vitally important to our students' writing growth. What if this model of writing instruction could find its way into classrooms around our state?

Discovering Your Writer's Voice: Fourth and Fifth Graders (Jodene)

On the first day of camp in 2010, I asked campers to raise their hands if they were happy to be there. Of the twelve students, a few hands enthusiastically flew into the air. Asked if they would rather be at Disneyland, the majority were laughingly raised. Asked if they would rather be at the dentist, two hands shot into the air. I accepted the challenge to convince all the campers that writing could be as much fun as Disneyland, or at least more enjoyable than the dentist's chair.

I teach literacy methods courses in our teacher credential program and continually remind my teacher candidates of the importance of modeling to increase motivation and engagement and to ensure student success. Therefore, the first writing activity is collaborative and step-by-step, requiring dialogue and the sharing of ideas. The activity yields a pantoum that includes the ideas and words of all campers. A pantoum is a twenty line poem composed of ten statements, phrases or sentences which repeat throughout the poem. In less than thirty minutes, we produced a pantoum about dessert, a topic chosen by the campers (see sample). With the use of a laptop and LCD projector, campers contributed their lines, observed the structure of the poem, edited, and read the final product together. Then they spent the rest of the first day producing their own pantoums. Several students chose to share their pantoum at the end of camp and include it in the anthology.

Dessert

Written by the Class of 2010

Desserts are so sweet they make you drool like a waterfall
I eat dessert after eating dinner every single day
I live for desserts
Everybody in the entire universe loves desserts

I eat dessert after eating dinner every single day
Desserts are as fantastic as winning 10 million dollars
Everybody in the entire universe loves desserts
A world made of desserts is a kid's dream

Desserts are as fantastic as winning 10 million dollars
Desserts are deliciously scrumptious
A world made of desserts is a kid's dream
Dessert is as tasty as infinity and beyond giant sugar cubes

Desserts are deliciously scrumptious
Ice cream is a great dessert
Dessert is as tasty as infinity and beyond giant sugar cubes
Dessert can make you as fat as the universe

Ice cream is a great dessert
I live for desserts
Dessert can make you as fat as the universe
Desserts are so sweet they make you drool like a waterfall

Developing Your Writer's Voice: Sixth through Eighth Grade (Matt)

The middle school students make their way into the classroom on the first day,. There are the girls, chatty and sociable from the start, most having brought their own personalized writing journals. Then there are the boys, most of whom were dropped off by their mothers who wistfully hoped that camp would be "good for them." Clumped together at one table, shoulders slouched, the boys don't share the girls' vision for the class.

Writing needs to be purposeful as well as fun. Middle school students may need to write an essay occasionally, but at this age it is more important that they gain confidence in their writing while developing the skills that illustrate sophisticated writing. One activity that serves these two purposes is a Color Poem. A Color Poem engages students in thinking about colors through all the senses, helps students work with metaphors, and gives students success at writing poetry without the worry of doing it "right." Students simply define a color according to all the senses. What does red feel like? What does blue smell like? What does yellow sound like? They put their responses into poetic form, creating work that they are truly proud of.

Purple

by Emily Burton

Purple sounds like the steady pitter-patter of rain on a gloomy day.
Purple feels smooth and glossy like cold, flawless metal.
Purple smells like the clean, minty smell that rain leaves behind.
Purple tastes like an almost sour plum.

Green

by Katherine Lalicker

The sound of joyous laughter on a breezy summer day.
The feel of a smooth mischievous garden snake.
The smell of cool mist from a roaring fresh waterfall.
The sharp taste of sweet Aloe Vera Juice.
The bite of a dark vicious viper.
The hand of a gentle mother.
The whisper of a small timid child.
The love of a scruffy scared mutt in need of comfort.
The sight of a lush spring meadow.
The smell of a new bright morning when you have just come out of the shower.

Transforming Attitudes

Based on positive comments from parents, campers, and teachers from the 2009 writers' camp, we decided to design a pre-post writing attitude test to measure changes in campers' attitudes as a result of the two week camp. In a meeting prior to the first day of camp, the director, co-director and teachers selected ten statements from the Daly and Miller's Writing Apprehension Test (WAT) which we felt were most applicable to our students and program.

The survey was administered on the first and last day of camp to all campers. To match the surveys and keep the responses anonymous, campers were asked to write their favorite color and shoe size on their surveys. Out of the 34 campers, we gathered 27 matched response pairs.

For each statement, participants selected a response on a Likert Scale: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree. Each response was assigned a numerical value: strongly agree (1), agree (2), neutral (3), disagree (4), and strongly disagree (5) to calculate an average

for each statement. The statements were then sorted into negative statements (1 - 3) and positive statement (4 - 10).

By averaging the students' responses on the pre- and post-test surveys,

Statement	Pre	Post	Difference
1. My mind seems to go blank when I start to work on my composition	2.74	3.04	+0.3
2. I don't think I write as well as most other people	2.48	2.93	+0.45
3. I' m not good at writing	3.25	3.85	+0.6
4. I look forward to writing down my ideas	2.2	1.9	-0.3
5. I feel confident in my ability to express my ideas clearly in writing	2.44	1.93	-0.31
6. I like to have my friends read what I have written	2.81	2.33	-0.5
7. I enjoy writing	2.52	1.96	-0.5
8. It' s easy for me to write good compositions	3.07	2.7	-0.4
9. Writing is a lot of fun	2.44	2.04	-0.4
10. I like seeing my thoughts on paper	2.3	2.4	-0.14

we were able to see changes in attitude in a positive direction for all statements. Granted, we did not engage in in-depth statistical analysis, but were pleased to see that two weeks of writing camp had successfully changed the attitudes of our participants as a group.

Two weeks is a short amount of time with a new group of students with varying attitudes and writing experiences. As any teacher knows, it takes time to establish rapport and trust; writing may be the most personal activity and product students share with a teacher. To see an overwhelmingly positive change in a group of young writers' attitudes in just two weeks is extremely encouraging. Imagine what we could do with an entire school year!

Conclusion

Since the inception of No Child Left Behind, the testing tail has been wagging our instructional dog. In an effort to raise test scores and school API ratings, teachers have moved away from the well-tested foundations of writing instruction: student choice, revision, writer's craft, publication, and authentic assessment. Instead of giving students blocks of time to write, revise, and share, we focus on teaching writing recipes with the five-paragraph essay. Ironically, the instruction designed to help students do well on state tests often has the opposite effect. By inhibiting their inclination toward authentic, complex communication--writing that "shows what they know"--such instruction denies students their identities as writers and damages their belief in themselves as authors. They produce the voiceless, nearly meaningless texts that Ken Macrorie (1985) so aptly named "Engfish."

We have a new generation of teachers who are observing and completing student teaching in classrooms stifled by policy and incessant talk of high-stakes testing. Many students in our teacher credential programs sense that what they are viewing in classrooms--including formulaic, sterile writing instruction--is not what is best for students,. Therefore, it is our responsibility to bring our knowledge, experiences and findings from the Young Writers Camp to the K-12 classrooms through our teaching, conference talks, and publication. We have seen what is possible with young writers in a short amount of time. The writing activities we did on the campus of Cal State Northridge are possible in any classroom. They did not require additional funding or special materials, just a reconceptualization of writing and writer identity.

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