

Teacher Inquiry Project

Inquiry: How can students engage more authentically with their own writing?

Context: Student writing has been at the forefront of my intentions for as long as I've been a teacher of English. I have started to move away from the formulaic five-paragraph model toward more authentic pieces of writing in the hopes of getting students to look at writing less as an "assignment" and more as an act of expression. However, I still struggle with having students interact more authentically with a prompt or task, especially when it comes to revisions. My objective is to generate classroom habit and practices that help my creative writing students (and hopefully my English 9 students, as well) produce thoughtful and personal work they want to take pride in.

Background for Study: Avon High School is a 9-12 school with over 2900 students.

Avon High School's data page according to the Indiana DOE for the 2015-2016 school year shows a majority white (69.5%) population, followed by black (12.9%) and Hispanic (8.0%). Meal price data shows 16.9% free and 6.2% reduced meal prices for the population. The school's graduation rate was 97.9%, with an ECA pass rate of 82.5%.

My own experience in the district reveals a population at odds with the changes to its demographics. Ten years ago (2006-2007 school year) the high school was 83.4% white, 7.5% black, and 4.2% Hispanic; free lunches comprised 7.9% and reduced lunches 4.8%. As the population of Avon continues to expand, the community and schools seem slow to meet their more diverse student population where they are. For example, among similar high schools in the county and of similar population size in Central Indiana, Avon is in the minority by not having a course offering to help students who have failed their English ECA.

Rationale and Significance: At the close of the 2015-2016 school year, I was placed in charge of a creative writing class for the following year that I had to design myself from the ground up. I had experience with creative writing courses and workshops in college, but not in designing one myself to teach students. I sought ways to make the process feel authentic and to encourage students to explore their writing, just as I was working to do with the Freshman English courses I was teaching. As much as I may want my students to write for me, it won't grow or carry over beyond my door if they aren't writing for themselves.

I used several imitation approaches with my students, but I found that many students' interactions with the assignments felt contrived. I thought that the issue

might have been time. Writing is a slow process and perhaps I was not giving student enough time. But as I gave students more time, I found that many of them produced just as little or even less material. To further undermine my assumptions, students seemed to do just fine during Writers Marathons every Friday, in which time was abbreviated. but participation was highest. I was going to have to approach the situation differently than I had my own creative writing experience.

Methodology: Students will make use of writers' notebooks and surveys to record their ideas. Student-led read alouds will allow them to bring themselves and their interests into the classroom.

Implementation—Creative Writing: Introduce writers' notebooks and read aloud practice early in the semester (week 2) for students to generate their own prompts/topics and model texts and gain exposure to authentic texts that may lie outside their (and my) familiarity.

[July/January] Our first week of school is a three-day block schedule rotation in which I see classes twice for 70 minute periods. I like the Index card interview as an introduction strategy that addresses writing, revisions, and interaction. The flexibility to allow share-alouds or to collect responses will also allow me to take the temperature of my class.

Our follow-up on Day 2 will continue to be my "Your America" found poem from Tony Hoagland's "America." I intend to use the activity to introduce writers' notebooks and demo a read-aloud. A modeled-response gallery-walk (anonymous) will round out the introductory week.

[August/January] Starting with the first full week, I will implement a daily read-aloud followed by writers' notebook time. I want students to have the opportunity to bring themselves into the classroom to give an idea of their writing interests. My ulterior motive here is also to facilitate some low-stakes participation by having them share something other than their own work.

I also want them to have time to record their own thoughts and reactions as potential fodder for their own writing. Author imitations can help us model the **form** of established writing, but I want students to have enough content to confidently approach the writing assignments.

Initial focus: mining personal experience. Atwell's "writing territories" and writers' notebooks focus heavily on the self as the gateway to writing. Historically, I focus on the **image** as the core of writing and later prompt students to make their work feel more personal. Personal poems like the "Where I'm From," "My Bad Angel," and (a poetry-form of) "The Things They Carried" will replace image as point of the spear for our exploration of poetry, pushing image and form back a week. Writers' Notebook: *What makes a good image? List some images that could be worked meaningfully into writing.*

[Late August-September/February]

We continue to utilize our Writers' Notebooks in parallel with our poetry focus. Writers' Notebook: *Look for repetition around you. How does it repeat? Does it break?*

Moods: What makes you happy? Scared? Angry? Why might they affect you?

Odes: What is important to you? How do we show respect/meaning?

Starting in week four, I have had students begin a poetry workshop in which they select a poem of their choosing from the ones they've been working on to share and get feedback. This approach has, in retrospect, been akin to throwing students in the deep end to teach them to swim. Kelly Gallagher's RAGs approach to peer response feels like a low(er)-stakes way of having students get feedback on their work and share their writer much more quickly (each poetry workshop consumes about six class periods). This should also allow me to explore revisions earlier in the course and have students prepare and bank some revisions for their final portfolio. Utilize Atwell's "Rules for Writing Workshop" to save and date drafts and fragments for future use.

[October/March]

As we transition to short stories, we take a pause at characterization and dialogue. Writers' Notebook: *Listen/look for good dialogue. How does good dialogue differ from normal conversation?*

What quote(s) do you find meaningful?

[November/April]

Short story focus, looking at plot and narrative structure. Writers' Notebook: *What*

problems do you notice in the world around you?

What questions do you have about the world?

What makes a good story? What are some of your favorite stories?

What about them pulls you in?

[December/May]

In addition to having students submit selected pieces with their revisions for a final portfolio, students will also include a reflection of the course and their writing. Students will select work to include in a class anthology, giving an authentic audience to their writing. I will also look into student-centered writing contests or journals. I see the Scholastic Arts and Writing Awards have a September deadline, so it might be that we prep submissions in advance or I pursue other options.

Annotated Bibliography

Atwell, Nancie. *Lessons That Change Writers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2002. Print.

Atwell provides a framework for executing a writing workshop, starting with having students define their “writing territories,” a springboard for authentic expression of their passions and values (3-8). She also offers opportunities for students to mine their own reading for narrative design and use their observations to influence their own writing (23-24). For revisions or “polishing,” Atwell also suggests having students generate lists of what they do when they go back over their work to form a revision guide that is relevant and that students will use (58-60).

Atwell, Nancie. *In the Middle: New Understandings About Writing, Reading, and Learning*. 2nd ed. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998. Print.

Atwell establishes clear expectations for her students during writing workshops (115-116) and revisits the idea of the writing territories (121-122). Her writing workshops give students free range in selecting their topics, genres, and audiences (140) and to conference with their teacher about difficulties and concerns, if not on a daily basis (151).

Zemelman, Steven and Harvey Daniels. *A Community of Writers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1988. Print.

When designing writing assignments, Zemelman and Daniels emphasize the importance of using inquiry-oriented activities and defining the audience(s) that students will be writing for (120-122). To further the notion of authenticity, the authors also propose having students choose their own genres and experiment with a variety of genres over the course to get a feel for the nuance of various modes of writing and how to interact with each (94-97).