

NCTE Summer Institute presentation

The development of my poetry unit and workshop presentation for NCTE summer institute was inspired by a writing workshop I attended with Penny Kittle. The workshop helped me to see that teachers need to be actively involved in what they are teaching in order to be effective. In other professions people practice their trade, for example mechanics, or gourmet chefs do not just talk about how to repair a car or cook a meal they actually engage in the process.

Many teachers who teach reading and writing do not read and write themselves, therefore cannot possibly understand what goes on in each stage of the writing process. They would not know how it feels to sit with a blank paper or computer screen after being assigned a topic. They also would be unable to share in the enthusiasm of someone who has hit on a hot topic or the anxiety of someone who wants every sentence to be perfect in their head before writing it on paper. Revising this initial draft also comes with many decisions, how do you guide revision if you have never struggled to revise a piece of writing. The process needs to be modeled so that students can see how complex this process is and come to understand that good writing takes time. The teachers who are writing unfortunately do not always share their writing with students.

During Penny Kittle's workshop we were given the opportunity to write. I found that some of the topics were much easier to write about while others frustrated me. I think that for the first time I could really understand how a student felt after being assigned a topic and realizing that they had nothing to say. There is a silent pressure all around you as you watch others with their heads down and pencils moving across the page, the harder you think the emptier your mind gets. I actually started to sweat, thinking, "Great, what if I have to share and my page is still blank?" At this point I realized that I would also need to teach my students strategies for this very situation. Remember though no two writers are the same and what works for me, or you, may not work for everyone. There are many techniques like listing words and using associations, webbing is another strategy or even writing exactly what you are experiencing at that very moment. I now realized that time limits could also add to the pressure. I thought about all the times I set deadlines for student writing and realized that writing cannot be ordered, it is a creative and individual process that requires nurturing. All of these insights only came because I was now engaging in the same process required of my students. As a result I vowed to be more diligent with my own writing and to become a part of the writing community that I am trying to establish each year in my classroom.

Easier said than done, teaching is a very challenging task. We have students with a range of abilities as well as many behavioral issues that must be factored into our daily plans. Often a crisis can suddenly arise which alters the course of the day. After saying this I still believe that it can be done and I have been successful in creating a community of writers in my grade 7/8 class. The students need to see you writing with them, they need to know that this is also your writing time and you are also expected to have something to share. You must write as a class daily, share and discuss your frustrations, your goals and your accomplishments with your writing. Students must have lots of short free-writes and never be forced into sharing something they deem too personal. Sharing is contagious and if they know that they are all expected to share at some point each week and thanked properly for sharing, it catches on.

Recently, I had a long discussion with a published children's writer about her craft and she talked about all the research that goes into a story in order to make it realistic. She was writing about characters that are blind and in her presentation to students, actually blindfolded one child and had the child follow a few commands. This helped the children to become more aware of the reality of blind people when things they naturally take for granted become major obstacles. This really promotes the idea that you cannot truly understand someone until you have walked a mile in his shoes. I believe that this is also true for teaching. Before you can be an effective teacher you must be a willing learner. Throughout the poetry unit I have included samples of my writing at different stages in order to model the process and demonstrate how each writer has his own approach.

I decided to focus my unit on poetry because it is an area where many adults recall terribly painful high school experiences. In my own experience, as well as in the majority of my young adult literature students' experiences, poetry was not a source of enjoyment. Poetry class meant dissecting a poem to find the true meaning that was hidden inside the teacher's answer book. It did not take into consideration the personal experience that the reader brought to the poem which helped him connect to prior knowledge and create a meaningful context for analysis. Poetry had a distinct pattern that needed to be identified for examination purposes. How many times do you open a poetry book and write all the rhyme schemes for each poem? Poetry is art and is meant to be enjoyed; we need to leave the dissection to the scientist.

Presenting at the NCTE summer institute provided me with the opportunity to share some of my experiences and insights involving writing with youth. It was also an opportunity to show what students can do when given freedom and strategic guidance to develop their writing talents.

Thanks for the opportunity, ATEQ

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