

Two or Three Things I Know for Sure About Helping Students Write the Stories of Their Lives

We can define authentic writing as writing that has its roots in topics and feelings the writer actually cares about. With an older student of, say, high school age, we have a pretty good idea what kind of topics these might be: anything from the serious issue of a toxic waste dump in her neighborhood to her more mundane concern about her inability to get a date for the junior prom. But what is authentic writing for first-graders?

The writer of this article considers this question and finds some answers.

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*As long as writing remains a natural and purposeful activity, made available without threat, then children will be willing to practice it and consequently will learn. —Frank Smith, *Essays Into Literacy* (80)*

In recent years, Frank Smith's notion of the importance of purpose to the writing process has been confirmed for me as well as my first grade students. We discovered that an authentic reason and appropriate audience made our writing real, unlike the forced and awkward exercise that is most school writing. I want to share with you our journey to this discovery.

My own understanding of Smith's point began when I had an opportunity to write during my weeks in the Coastal Georgia Writing Project Summer Institute in 1991. I was moved to write because I had experiences I wished to share. I wrote about my eventful rafting trip down the Nantahala River. I captured learning

snapshots of some of my students. Sometimes I only wanted to write a family memory for my children. More often than not, I wanted to write for myself so that I might explore an idea before it evaporated. I realized that all this writing was linked to an overarching purpose. No matter what I was writing, I was celebrating my life. This was my reason for putting my pen to paper.

Returning to my classroom, I recognized that if I used writing as a way of celebrating my life, my students could write to celebrate their lives. How could I make this happen?

Reflecting on My Students' Lives in Song

As my students' chatter echoed through the classroom on the first day back at school, it occurred to me that I could bring students to celebrate their lives by using my voice to mark the importance of their lives. That would be my purpose, and they would be my audience. It was then that I remembered what my friend Nancy

McCorkle would do for her young students. When one of her students would arrive at school with a new haircut, she would sing a song for them that announced the momentous event to the class.

*Leroy's got a new haircut.
Leroy's got a new haircut.
Leroy's got a new haircut,
He wore to school today.*

I too began to sing about haircuts and other events. Although my students did not envy my singing voice, my song was, nevertheless, always welcome. I would barely get to my desk before a smiling child would tug at my skirt saying, "Mrs. Rotkow, guess what? I got a haircut! You've got to sing to me when everybody gets here. Okay?" Or, another child might run up to me beaming, "Mrs. Rotkow! Mrs. Rotkow! You've got to sing me a song today. I got new shoes!"

The musical hit parade continued with different verses added, collaboratively, as events dictated. "Mitch Miller Rotkow"

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and her first grade chorus would sing about birthdays, new teeth, welcome backs, and any other reasonable celebration asked for from the hem of my skirt.

The words and music of their lives sifted cheerfully into our room's every nook and cranny. As a teacher-researcher, I began to wonder how I might document my students' lives so that they could feel and taste the words beyond that one day of celebration in our classroom.

Reflecting on My Students' Lives in Poetry

Unexpectedly one morning, Janice sat down and told me that her sister, Jennifer, a former student of mine, had broken her arm. "Why, Janice," I said, "maybe we could write her a get well poem. Do you think she might like that?"

With pencils and journals ready, we explored the ideas for our message. Since it was our first attempt at writing a poem, I sculpted their ideas aloud as I wrote them on the board. They supplied the necessary rhyming words. Finally, everyone was pleased with Jennifer's poem. Thus began the poetry postcards. Jennifer's poem was simply written on a piece of newsprint along with my crudely drawn picture:

Get Well Soon

*Oh, my goodness!
What happened to you?
Guess you're feeling
Somewhat sad and blue.*

*Maybe these warm wishes,
Will help you feel better,
Sent along with our love,
Tucked away in this letter.*

It was the message that was important. We cared that Jennifer, the older sister of one of the members of our community, had

been hurt. Janice adored her sister and our poem affirmed the loving relationship they shared and provided an important link between school and home. More importantly, our poem reflected that the language we were learning every day could and should be used for real, authentic purposes beyond the isolated textbook exercises seen in many classrooms.

Inviting My Students into the Conversation

We continued to celebrate individual and shared experience. One day, for instance, Michael bounded into the classroom exclaiming that his dad had taken the training wheels off his bike. "I guess I need to write you a poem, don't I?" I asked.

So I tried to retrieve from my own experience how I felt when I had my training wheels removed from my first "grown-up" bicycle. But that experience was too far in my past to recapture. I knew that Michael could help. The poem needed to be about his experience, not someone else's.

The next morning I asked Michael to tell me about what happened when he got the training wheels off. "Gosh, mom and dad don't have to walk next to me anymore!" he replied with a confident grin.

Ali, who sat in front of him, overheard our conversation. She said, "I got to ride with the big kids!" Michael smiled in acknowledgement.

I was now armed with the ammunition I would need to turn Michael's experience into a poem, or so I thought.

*Wow!
No more training wheels!*

*You'll pedal the metal all by yourself,
With everybody cheering you on!*

*Wow!
No more training wheels!

You'll swish like a fish through the
water,
Without mom and dad beside you!*

*Wow!
No more training wheels!

You'll ride and glide with the big
kids,
On two wheels not those babyish four.*

*Wow!
No more training wheels!*

*Doesn't get any better than that,
does it?*

I thought the result would please Michael when I proudly read it to him the following day. He looked at me for a long moment, then said, "I don't like the way you keep repeating, 'Wow! No more training wheels!'"

"You really don't like it?" I asked, a tinge of disappointment in my voice.

"No. I think it would be better without it," he countered as the other students' heads nodded in agreement.

So, it was back to the drawing board for one more try, this time with fewer repetitions. Hearing the revision, Michael smiled along with the others. One thing I knew for sure: now I would talk to my students first before I began to document their lives in poetry.

Passing the Poetry Baton to My Students

My students had come to understand that celebrating their experiences had given us authentic purposes for writing. However, to this point I was the one doing the writing. I began to wonder how my poetry postcards were helping my students

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become better writers themselves.

As if on cue, Josh entered the classroom, banging his rolling book bag on the floor and wearing a disgruntled expression on his face.

"My goodness, Josh, what's wrong this morning?" I asked anticipating my question would at least quiet the dissonant banging.

"My book bag is broken. See, the handle won't go down," he answered. "Mom's going to get a new one this afternoon. I'll need a 'new book bag' poem."

"You know what, Josh? I don't have a 'new book bag' poem." I said, waiting for the look of disappointment to reflect in his eyes.

Without missing a beat, he said, "Why don't we write a 'new book bag' poem?"

Once again my students pointed the way for their learning. Putting aside my planned journal prompt, I asked the children to think of words that described their book bags. After writing their list on the board, I asked them to use the words on the board to write a "new book bag" poem for Josh.

This poetry writing would mark a transition as I envisioned passing the poetry baton to my students. No longer would I have the job as poet laureate of first grade. My students would now assume that awesome responsibility.

My dream became a nightmare when I heard my students' poems. With only a few exceptions, all of my students had written "Roses are red/Violets are blue" poems. Katie's poem was a typical example:

*Roses are red.
Violets are blue.
I love my book bag,
Just like you.*

Where had my students gotten the idea to write these poems? I could not think of one "Roses are red" poem I had read to the class that year. One by one, each child read his/her poem until it was Josh's turn. Josh, the *raison d'être* for this assignment, read his poem that looked like a story and was filled with his invented spelling.

*I fet sad
When my book bag
wus
brokn.
I will lik it
When my book bag
is
fixd.*

When I asked the children how they came up with their ideas for writing their book bag poems, no one had any idea. That is, until we got to Josh. He thought for a moment, then said, "This is how I felt."

This poem mattered to Josh, a boy who was afraid to write at the beginning of the year. He's the one who knew how he felt and how important this poem was for him to write. His classmates were only completing the assignment.

Michael did not have a problem telling me what he didn't like about my bicycle poem and wanted to share its importance so that I would get it "right." He owned the bicycle poem just as Josh owned his book bag poem. Michael and Josh taught me one more thing I now know for sure. I came to understand that children must be invested in the idea of the poem before they can write it.

This investment was sometimes inspired and often assisted by the books in our classroom. When Melissa decided to write a poem, she chose to write about all of the bows she had that decorated her long, curly hair. I suggested that she look

through the poems in her anthology* and find one she'd like to use as a model. She stopped at one of the two-voiced poems in Mary Ann Hoberman's book *You Read to Me, I'll Read to You*. Melissa thought "Hop and Skip," a selection we had read earlier, might work with her idea. Out came her pencil as she wrote her ideas in her journal. There were no "roses are red" moments in Melissa's poem.

Bows Are Different Colors

Bows are black.

Bows are red.

Bows are yellow.

Bows are tan.

Bows are blue.

Bows are gray.

Bows are orange.

Bows are pink.

Bows are purple.

Bows are green.

*Bows are everywhere all in and
around your hair!*

We love bows.

When she reflected on the writing of her poem, she said, "I concentrated on my writing, and I never said I couldn't do it. I trusted myself." I trusted Melissa, too, to write the poem she had imagined.

Melissa and Josh led the way for the others. Poetry, in all of its shapes and voices, began to surface in our first grade classroom. One more thing I knew for

*Author's note: Beginning the first day of school, I give my students various songs and poems to put into individual loose-leaf notebooks. These collections become our anthologies. Some of the included pieces tie in with a topic we are studying; others are just for fun. Every morning, we sing or recite any new pieces together. By the end of the year, the students have amassed a notebook full of these songs and poems. I have the children take them home, and I tell them to put the notebooks on their bedside table for nighttime reading. I also suggest they save this notebook for their children. It becomes one of the many texts we use to reinforce all of the language skills as well as to model various forms of poetry.

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sure was that literature could provide writing models for my students' writing.

Composing My Students' Lives in Prose

At the same time my students were experimenting with writing poetry, they were also trying to find their narrative voices. Much of this experience was gained through regular journal writing. And my students certainly had a lot to say in their journals—about themselves, about their friends, and about their lives. Although we began the year as strangers, together we learned about each other's lives and learning. Journal writing became the invitation for that learning as I asked them to tell me about themselves from that very first day of school.



Through our journal work, I discovered Amy was going to have a baby sister or brother, and that Sophie was about to lose a tooth. And it was in sharing our journals—mine as well—that they discovered I was older than most of their moms and dads. Our classroom reverberated with the stories of our lives as we wrote, talked, and reflected. We became a community.

By recording incidents and feelings that were important to them, students were on the way to purposeful writing. When Josh—a reluctant writer—looked through his journal for a writing idea, he abruptly stopped on the page that told about the time he got his stitches. Getting stitches was an important experience for him as well as a badge of honor that he wanted to share with us.

"I was behind the couch when I just got hurt, and I said, 'No! No!' I was scared to get my stitches. I was

worried to get my stitches because I was afraid they would hurt me. I will not go behind the couch again and try not to let my little brother Harry do it."

As he read the final word of this story to the class, all of his friends clapped with excitement knowing how hard Josh had worked.

Writing came easier to Lynn but, like Josh, telling a story important to her gave her writing purpose. Her dog Luke mattered to her. "The first time I saw Luke's body was in the Humane Society. I had no idea he was going to be mine," her piece began. As it continued, every sentence revealed just how important Luke was to Lynn.

Both Josh and Lynn instinctively knew that their journal writing had helped them filter out what mattered most to them in their lives. But on other rarer occasions, events occurred that mattered to all the students all at once. That was the case on the day that Stephanie was absent. Assuming Stephanie was at home sick, we continued with our early morning routine. Then I learned about Stephanie's dad. He had died from a heart attack that morning while putting his children into the car for their trip to school. I put aside our planned routine and told the children about this shocking event. What could we do for Stephanie? The children had an understanding of how the death of Stephanie's father would impact her world. Our writing community took on a shared purpose.

I read them Judith Viorst's *The Tenth Good Thing About Barney*. In the book, a little boy's dog dies and, when planning the dog's funeral, the boy's mother suggests her son think of ten good things about his dog, Barney.

Using Judith Viorst's idea, I asked the children to open their journals and write at least one good thing about Stephanie's dad. Finding a common purpose for our writing, we shared ideas and put them in a letter to Stephanie.

Dear Stephanie,

We are sorry that your daddy died. He was a nice daddy. He used to take you over to people's houses. We liked the way he laughed. He had a big smile. Your daddy was tall. He took you swimming and to get ice cream. We know you will miss him. We will miss him, too. We hope you will come back to school soon.

*Love, Your First
Grade Friends*

Reflecting on My Life in the Classroom

I began the year wondering how I might find the wisdom to help my students discover a purpose for their writing—the same purpose I had found in the writing project summer institute.

I knew that a first step would be getting students to pay attention to the events of their lives and to understand that these events were appropriate subjects for writing. That's when I began to write about haircuts and other important moments in their lives. Increasingly, the writing became collaborative, with students helping me and each other toward finished drafts. The journals, which we all kept from early on in the semester, gave students a chance to record important events that, later, would lead to purposeful writing. My first-graders wrote for themselves, about themselves, and

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along the way, wanted to share themselves with others. And I emerged from the experience with two or three things I know for sure.

All of these things came together in our letter to Stephanie, when our writing took on the challenge of a writing task that was purposeful, natural, and nonthreatening. Despite the sad circumstances, Frank Smith would be smiling.

References

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