

The School Yearbook: A Guide to Writing and Teaching

BY JON APPLEBY

Remember when . . .

*Mr. Miller almost blew up the science lab . . .
Alicia was stuck in the shopping carriage . . .
taking the bus was the only way to get to
school.*

In late May at our high school, yearbooks go on sale. Kids pay 40 hard-earned dollars for their own copies of *The Grail*. From the first minutes, students read the notes and “highlights” beneath each others’ photos while sitting against their lockers on the hallway floors. They open them during class, write in them through lunch. Even the most compliant kids sneak peeks when they think I’m not looking. I’ve had players on the bench leaf through the book during softball games. For a few days at least, for the weeks moving into graduation, the book is irresistible.

What I bring to my classes seems to run counter to the students’ need to share the yearbooks. My curriculum gets dropped in a heartbeat for spirited words scribbled over photos. I confess to jealousy on those days, and I am left with clear questions: How can I make my classroom as fascinating and consuming as the yearbook? Why don’t I more often?

The yearbook is, after all, pure English. Condensed, detailed, often coded writing appears beneath beaming faces. Personal experience—stories—are captured in tight phrases and winking abbreviations. Each individual has a chance to be just that, truly themselves, in a cavalcade of local characters. People choose quotations to represent themselves. Between friends, there are private jokes, secrets, and shared emotions. With acquaintances, with people on the edges of my understanding, those private phrases become puzzles. I figure out who W. T. is, or who the Slick Six are. I consider the characters I know and those I don’t. I savor the differentiations, the small details that speak to truths about people.

The yearbook is also history, local and specific. It offers a sense of nostalgia with the possibility of a collected community perspective. The record of sports teams sits beside the memorial to a student who committed suicide. A retiring teacher is saluted, and the annual musical is reprised in photo essays and quotations. Nearly every handwritten, superimposed comment speculates on the future. The yearbook is a motivational expression of community, one fond or blunt comment at a time:

Suz— Hola chiquita! I don't know if I spelt that right. Anyway, wow, we're almost graduated! I can't believe it. I can't wait, although I'll be really sad. Don't laugh if I cry. Well, you've been a good friend in school, and at Market Basket. Even though you were the cause of a major eau bad part of my life. Uhhh!! Don't make me think of it. I can't wait until this summer, make sure you and Brian come and visit me. . . .



After publication, we react to the book. In signing each others’ yearbooks, disclosure and celebration begin to put the published words and pictures literally in the background. The margins become a place to write our personal thoughts. Public words are enriched by the private. People have a sense that what they write will be saved, that there will be audiences in the future. Isn’t that what any writer dreams of? And any teacher?

I write over my photo in the faculty pages. There is rarely enough room in the margins. A young man in my English class who can’t write half a page when I give an assignment fills the entire inside cover for a girl he is trying to impress. I notice a shy, dignified faculty member writes the same words in every book, on the page opposite mine: “Good luck,” with a signature. Joyful and honest comments sit there with the perfunctory and restrained. Almost no one writes horizontally. Words slant as if against the grain of the original intent:

*NICKNAMES: skinny, stinky.
FAVORITE QUOTE: Ain't skeered.*

AMBITION: to work for my father, move where no one will ever bother me, and live happily ever after.

Later, when the books are full of comments, friends read each other’s to see what people have written to one another. The sharing continues. The book is alive, growing each time a new person signs it. Always, there is a sense that these books will be put aside, saved, and pulled out now and then by individuals who follow their own paths. Mothers will show their high school selves to their own children. Reunions, spontaneous and organized, will be helped by the record the yearbook provides. Our imperfect memories will have help.

Jenn—The same artistic passion which landed you in Make-up English created your photo essay on the old house. You experimented with prints, with contrasts and words in the most challenging, bravest kind of work, and you should be proud. I am. Come back and show us your future work!

How can I make my classroom more like the yearbook?

Take more pictures and put them on the bulletin board. Have kids caption them. Design small descriptive writing assignments using the photographs, the prom, homecoming. Get kids to choose quotes from things they have read that represent what they feel and think and put them on the walls.

Check in about their lives. Recognize achievements and individuals. Ask them to write down memories and simply, joyfully share them. Insist on a sense of tomorrow.

Take the time to keep putting varied feedback in the classroom. Design games that require mutual and self-assessment. Have students describe each others’ work. Let them establish norms and rules as they discover each other.

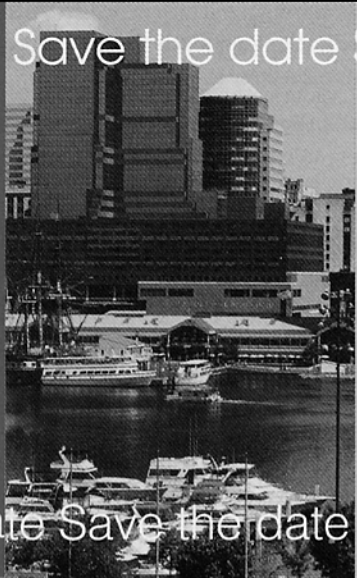
Get warm and cool—honest—feedback frequently about myself and my teaching. Model and risk feedback myself. Have students sign my yearbook.

Use narratives. Make quality comments on papers that put the paper in perspective within the student’s own personality and body of work. Emphasize what is newly skillful and what is growing in the individual piece as well as what might be next.

Write students letters that attempt to describe the student and the work that person has done.

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Save the date Save the date Save the date Save the date Save the date



National Writing Project Annual Meeting 2001 November 15-17

**Renaissance Harborplace Hotel
Baltimore, Maryland**

Watch for online meeting updates at www.writingproject.org

Baltimore 2001

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represented the cutting edge. "My goal really was to get caught up and [find out] where the research is going," said doctoral student Loretta Kane of UC Berkeley. Similarly, Kevin Leander of Vanderbilt University remarked, "I think the really important thing about the conference has been the introduction of some new perspectives on Bakhtin . . . especially to bring in some of the issues of ethics [and] morality."

Many felt the significance of an event such as this conference is found in its potential contribution to dialogue among those involved with the issue of language education in a variety of contexts. Joan Cone may have put it best, saying, "In teacher training programs, we have to read Bakhtin so that we can become participants in the conversation—so we can acquire the discourse. . . . Universities have to open themselves up, have more and more of these [conversations] . . . teachers need to be invited in so that we can see ourselves positioned as belonging to this community." Her comments, from a National Writing Project perspective, also seem a call to action for all of us to be involved.

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Take the time to get beneath the surface, to find the right phrase. That's what I ask them to do on every writing assignment.

Balance analysis with basic human feelings. Don't try to explain everything.

Respect work by insisting on audience and sharing.

Make the room theirs. Keep student work on the walls.

Pull out samples of student work from the past. Let students know their work has value next month, next year—not just on the due date for a grade. The yearbook will be taken out and read in ten years, in twenty. It feels continuous. So should my classroom.

Facilitate equality. Each senior in the yearbook has an equal chance. They choose the photograph to represent themselves. Each voice has space to speak.

Celebrate good work the way people do naturally: with words, with conventions as corny as birthday cakes and candles, with food.

Remember . . .

. . . the bomb scare . . .

. . . the lunch ladies . . .

. . . when a surprise block of ice cream became a banquet . . .

JON APPLEBY teaches juniors and seniors at Noble High School in Berwick, Maine, and is a member of Educators Writing for Change.

Write for *The Voice*!

We welcome stories about classroom practice, students' work, and activities at writing project sites, as well as opinion pieces and essays. Submissions run 600–1000 words in length. Photos are also welcome.

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