

Writing to the



Julie D. Ramsay

Students today can touch the world with the palms of their hands. When given a spare second, they engage with others through Instagram, Twitter, texting, Pinterest, Spotify, Facebook, blogs, YouTube, or myriad multiplayer games. We educators wonder how we could ever compete with those digital tools with an act as solitary as writing. How can we possibly lure our students into becoming powerful writers?

As a 6th grade English language arts teacher in Alabama, I see many students arrive in the classroom each year with little enthusiasm to write—and I'm sure you do, too. As someone who loves to write, I found the eye rolls, sighs, and moans of displeasure disheartening. Wondering how to spark their interest in writing, I analyzed how my students were spending their time online and found several elements that appeal to students. First, learners can communicate, share, and debate with others. Additionally, they have an audience they can connect with at any time in nearly any place. This audience provides (almost) immediate feedback on the experiences and ideas they share, which feeds students' desire for instantaneous results. I decided to try to give students these experiences through writing.

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World

Finding an audience and writing partners online gives students a reason to hone their writing skills.



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Forming a Foundation

To begin, I led my students in conversation about the purpose of writing. At first, students gave answers like, “We write so we will score well on the test.” When I continued to dig for more reasons to write, I generally got silence. Students were not sure what the “correct” answer was.

As I continued probing, my students realized that writing is simply communicating a thought to someone else, which is something they do every day, often without thinking of it as writing. One student even suggested that writing had to involve paper and pencil.

Once students broadened their view of writing to include communication that was meaningful to them, I queried about grammar and mechanics. They quickly realized that editing was crucial for an audience’s understanding. One learner even pointed out

that “text speak” could confuse some people so they needed to “stick with correct English.” From that point on, my learners’ perspectives on writing and editing completely changed.

Finding an Audience

In the Classroom . . .

Once learners have a strong foundation on the importance of writing, it’s time to provide them with the opportunity to write for an authentic purpose and audience. One of the most powerful tools that we use in our classroom is blogging. Because of its intuitiveness of use and the safety settings, we use KidBlog.

At the beginning of the year, my learners have a conversation about our expectations for online writing. Expectations vary from year to year, but they generally cover such topics as appropriate content, style, and frequency of posting. (See an example list of

expectations at <http://ramsaysclassblog.blogspot.com/p/blogging.html>.) It’s important to let students take the lead in this conversation, so they’ll have ownership of the process.

After expectations are set, students begin writing and publishing blogs. Each student has his or her own blog, visible only to others in the class. This gives them experience reading one another’s writing and providing thoughtful feedback before they begin interacting with others outside the classroom.

In their blog posts, students reflect on their learning and set goals for future endeavors. There’s no length requirement, other than that students write enough to clearly share their ideas. Some posts are about books or articles students have been reading and the lessons they’ve gleaned from these texts. A majority of the time, my learners write without prompts from me.

Joyce Sidman on Chasing Words

The deepest joy of writing comes from the work itself, not from the publishing of it. Before I published my first book, I kept thinking, “If only I could publish a book, I would be happy and fulfilled forever.” But strangely, that joy wears off, and you find yourself only wishing for the *next* published book, or a positive review, or the possibility of an award. Early on, I learned (but have to keep reminding myself) that the daily chasing of words holds the deepest sense of fulfillment; and rereading a well-done piece of writing is the ultimate—and most lasting—satisfaction.

Joyce Sidman (www.joycesidman.com) is the author of many books of poetry for children. Her most recent book is *What the Heart Knows: Chants, Charms, and Blessings* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013).



PHOTO BY KATHERINE WARDE

Depending on what expectations the class decides to set, there may be a minimum number of blog posts required each week. Two is a typical number of required posts, but students are welcome to write more. We have a motto in our classroom, “We can always do more, but never less.” It is not uncommon for some students to blog four or five times a week, depending on what’s on their minds and what they’re experiencing. The format is only limited by their creativity. I have had students create poems, short stories, interviews, game shows, and open letters to our board of education in their quest to share their learning.

Students often show their blog drafts to their peers to get feedback before publishing them. Once a post is published, students can give their peers feedback by leaving comments, thereby giving the author the opportunity to either edit and resubmit an updated version of their original writing or make clarifications in a comment on the blog post. Typically, I encourage students to make all edits and revisions in a comment on the

original post so the learner and I can see the progression of their thinking and learning.

One powerful element of KidBlog is the option for the teacher to send writers private comments, a feature only available to teachers or blog administrators. This enables me to provide needed instruction, prompts, or redirection if students’ peers have not provided them.

As I read and approve every blog post or comment, I can easily determine whether a student needs additional instruction in an area of writing. Then, I pull students with similar needs aside for small-group instruction. If, for example, I see that a learner or group of learners has a recurring challenge using homophones correctly, I will conduct a minilesson with those students and then guide them through their blog posts to identify places that need correction. Should any learners need more practice, the small-group instruction will continue, and students can work on the skill at practice stations as needed.

And Around the World

Once my students become adept at writing and commenting on one another’s blogs, we begin to connect with other classes worldwide. I have made connections through face-to-face conversations with other educators at conferences; in dialogues and chats on Twitter, the Educator’s PLN, and the Global Class Twitter wiki; and through other established projects like the Global Read Aloud and Mystery Skype. The amount of time we spend working together and the format of our collaboration varies, depending on the type of writing in which students are engaged.

My students have blossomed in the presence of an audience. Last year, for example, I had a student who was an English language learner with a reading-related learning disability. It was a struggle for her to write a couple of fragmented sentences, but she wanted to share her learning. The fact that others would be reading and making comments on her ideas motivated her to write what she could. During the year, her sentence structure drastically improved and became more complex. Her vocabulary

deepened, and she began writing descriptive paragraphs instead of short phrases. Not only did her motivation and self-esteem grow, but so did her understanding of what she was learning, as manifested through each of her posts.

One day, she wrote a couple of sentences regarding what she had learned about the American Revolution. Within a few hours, she received a comment from a class in Great Britain asking her, “What’s the American Revolution?” This shocked my students. “How could they not know about the American Revolution? We fought them.” Both classes then engaged in an ongoing conversation regarding historical events and their relevance to people from different backgrounds. Through this one student’s post, students on either side of the Atlantic Ocean discovered how different people view historical events and the importance of looking at writing, events, or text from multiple perspectives.

Over the last four years, connecting my students with peers in different grade levels, content areas, or geographic locations has been the most rewarding experience. Because there is an audience, students spend time thinking about their writing. They become creators of content, sharing their voices and taking ownership of their learning. It is not uncommon for my students to ask if they can stop what they are doing in class to compose a blog post to share their “aha” moments with their audience.

Creating Collaboratively

Often, when students are given the opportunity to connect with others, new ideas emerge. Last year, I had a student who loved to create videos and post them to YouTube. He discovered



that one of his global peers enjoyed composing music using GarageBand software. The two students collaborated to publish amazing videos to share with their peers and enhance the learning in the classroom. Video contents ranged from trailers of books they both enjoyed, to how to successfully shoot a basketball from the free-throw line, to the price of freedom.

Another time, we were working with a class in Indiana. Our students, who felt a strong desire to make a difference in the world, decided they wanted to create public service announcements (PSAs) on topics they found meaningful, such as high school dropout rates, recycling, deforestation, drug prevention, childhood obesity, weather preparedness, and texting while driving. The students formed groups based on interest and then began collaboratively publishing.

The class in Indiana was really strong in video editing, which was a

weakness for a majority of my students. My students felt that they were strong in the areas of script writing and creating the music, two areas we had used in previous projects. Because each group of students brought their own strengths and perspectives to the project, the final product was something greater than one individual—or one individual class—could have published alone.

Through the duration of this project, students connected through synchronous chats and asynchronous message boards on Moodle. All the parts of the project—the scripts, facts, music, images, and video clips—were uploaded to Moodle for writing partners to evaluate, analyze, and provide feedback on before creating their final PSAs. As they worked, learners discovered

how important it was to communicate with one another regularly. In the middle of the project, two of my students had created a script of an upbeat PSA that would inspire the audience positively to jump up and begin taking action. But when they chatted with their collaborators, they realized that the other part of the team wanted to create a call to action using shocking statistics. These students had to learn diplomacy, conflict resolution, and how to justify their own ideas to work through the problem. And when the projects were finished, they had gained an understanding of how their written words could bring about change in the world.

Managing the Madness

My students are engaged in one or more writing activities at a time, most of which are of their own design. I teach more than 100 students a day, so you may be wondering how I manage

all this madness. At first, it was overwhelming. But when I realized how much more growth my students were making in not just their writing, but also their ability to think, analyze, synthesize, evaluate, and assess, I knew I didn't want them to lose out on these crucial learning opportunities.

Considering that my students become voracious writers and I approve every post and comment on our blogs, I typically have close to 1,000 blog posts (plus comments) to review each semester. I have discovered that if I set a day when I know I will be working with blog posts, students will make sure that they have their posts done and ready to submit by that day. Because I teach multiple classes, I typically schedule a different day for each class.

Each day, part of our 90–100-minute class period is dedicated to work at a variety of learning stations at which students build various literacy skills. On blogging days, I use that time to read through posts and assess students' content-area knowledge, their writing, their reasoning and thinking, and their grammar. I then confer with students one-on-one or in small groups to give them the instructional support they need.

Of course, this is only a plan, and as with all classroom plans, flexibility is important. To keep students' collaborative work moving, there are times when I need to approve blog posts or comments before our scheduled blogging day. Although my preference is to read and approve posts while students are in class with me, I can provide support outside class hours through private commenting. When collaborating with another class, I also benefit from having another teacher's perspective as we both assess and provide assistance throughout the writing process.

I have tried many ways of documenting student progress, with varied

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levels of success. The best tool I have found is an app called Confer (www.conferapp.com). With Confer, I can take notes on individual students, document when we have met, and outline the instructional support I've provided. But the real power of this app is in the ability for students to set their own short-term and long-term goals. Individual students' short-term goals may be something as simple as correctly using plural possessives in their next five posts or correctly embedding five new-to-them descriptive words in their next three posts. A long-term goal may be to connect what they are learning to their lives in 80 percent of their posts for the next two months. These goals are measurable and important to each student. When I meet with students, we revisit their goals, and they set new ones or amend the previous ones. The focus remains on them and their learning, giving them the control for which they yearn.

Student-Centered Assessment


When embarking on this journey of redefining our writing practice, a student pointed out to me that because they were designing their own writing projects and perfecting their writing in collaboration with other students, it was only logical for them to create their own rubrics. My students already had a working knowledge of what a rubric was, so I guided them in creating one.

The first attempt to create a rubric each year usually takes an hour, as

learners need to gain an understanding of how a good rubric includes measurable criteria. After that initial rubric, future rubrics take 15 to 20 minutes to create. Through this process, the rubric is no longer an assessment tool imposed on students by a teacher or a faceless assessor, but one that is meaningful in guiding their growth as writers. (See a sample rubric, which my students created with students at another middle school for a book trailer project, at https://drive.google.com/file/d/0BycxVn9_vgJLWk4teVNIb24zR28.)

Once students have created a rubric, instead of putting it away until it's time to assess their finished project, they make it part of the conversation with their collaborators in class and online. It becomes a meaningful guide along their way to success. They push one another to reach new heights not only as writers, but also as educated, passionate, knowledgeable individuals who have something to say.

Becoming Powerful Writers—Together

Is it possible to bring together the worlds of digital social interaction and a core writing practice? Absolutely! Through writing activities such as these, learners become adept at sharing and defending their thoughts. They find their voices. They begin to drive their growth and the growth of their collaborators. They learn to think deeply and communicate clearly. And, ultimately, they become powerful writers. 

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