Exhibiting Student Writing

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Exhibitions of student learning, with their many projects, activities, and associated banter, can take on the atmosphere of a science fair or a grand opening at an art gallery. A student film festival, with its show schedule and question and answer time with directors, might only differ from a professional film festival in location and subtleties such as the number of limos in the parking lot. But to showcase the written word, we need an environment different from a typical project exhibition.

Professional writers rarely exhibit their work in large public gatherings where they compete with other simultaneous exhibitors for an audience's attention. However, every day of the week, writers exhibit their work in books, newspapers, magazines, and so on. Traditional publishing, such as books or magazines, offers a solution to the problem of exhibiting writing because it presents the students' written work in a natural and authentic setting. Just as the theater setting lends authenticity to a student film festival, publication does the same for student writing.

Exhibitions that display published writing projects are intentionally devised to give the audience both short- and long-term experiences. On the night of the exhibition, it is okay if the audience has a cursory interaction with the material. Let them thumb through the books and focus on the clean layouts, cool cover design, or outstanding photography. In the hustle and bustle of exhibition night, I don't expect everyone to stop and read an article that took months of daily work to complete. However, long after exhibition, when my students and I see the class's original books on teachers' desks, on shelves around the school, in backpacks year after year, we know that their exhibition continues, as it does in the world of professional writing.

While the quest for an authentic exhibition may have led me to embrace student publishing, the process has led me to realize that student publications provide a particularly effective leverage point for generating high quality writing.

Concerts, Not Pancakes

In strategizing ways to introduce my classes to the fundamental elements of writing, I was inspired by the columnist and professor Stanley Fish, who described a system that he referred to as "the 'Karate Kid' method of teaching writing." In the Karate Kid method, students learn highly stylized motions, just as Daniel-san famously did in the movie—wax on, wax off, paint the fence, and so on. The movie may be fictional, but the point is true. Daniel's mastery of

individually structured movements could be transferred to a different, dynamic context.

The same is true for writing. Rather than teach students that their native written language needs to be fixed, I introduce them to structures that exist in the world of the professionally written word. Rather than ask students to memorize a million grammatical rules, and then have them fear breaking them, I ask them to model their work on specific patterns used in professional publications.

Here is one example of the Karate Kid method I learned from Roy Peter Clark's podcast, "Writing Tools." In my class, we call this one "Make Meaning Early." When a writer uses this tip, he starts the sentence with the most important noun, the verb next, and lets the rest of the sentence follow. Like this: "I wrote this article." It's so easy that every student can bring his or her own ideas and content to the form, and quickly we have a classroom full of students writing sentences. Even better, I ask them to go through a highly regarded publication like The New Yorker and find sentences that "make meaning early." Students are often surprised, and then satisfied, to see sentence after sentence in a highly respected magazine structured so simply—noun, verb, object.

The most popular writing tip in my class is called "Concerts, not Pancakes." I thought of this one while listening to a comedian comment that pancakes start out so good—full of sugar in the syrup, delicious fat in the butter, and piled gloriously high on your plate—but pancakes end up as a nauseating mess of doughy-syrup-mush. And, in my case, the syrup always works its way up the handle of my fork, onto my forearm and into my beard. Gross! As I listened (and laughed), I thought, "That sounds like a lot of the writing I've seen. It starts out so good...but what happens?"

In "Concerts, not Pancakes," students learn that good writing should be like a good concert. In a good concert, the band always starts off with a powerful song that gets the crowd on their feet. They close the show with their big hit. If the band has anything new to try out, or anything that needs support, it goes in the middle. The idea is that a band gives a great concert by strategically sequencing its songs to achieve maximum effect. Great sentences are the same, as are great paragraphs, great articles and great books—professional writers order words to enhance their power.

Students are drawn to these writing tips because they are simple and effective. Those with previous success in Humanities are challenged to pick the "best" tip for the assignment, or to write a complicated idea simply. English language learners can quickly begin writing in

Standard English through a few key tips. The writing tips also transition students from seeing editing as a teacher-centered act of approval to an empowering activity in which they know the steps.

The writing tips have a second, almost hidden, feature revealed later in the semester: they are not focused on the perspective of the writer. Instead, they emphasize the reader. They embody the important lesson that a writer's job is to create an experience for a reader. Potential readers have a lot of other things they could do with their time besides read whatever you or I wrote. Great writers make the printed word important to an individual person, draw him or her into a specific world, and then send the reader back to reality but with new thoughts, ideas and perspectives. How do they do this? As Kurt Vonnegut once explained, by manipulating a code made up of "twenty-six phonetic symbols, ten numerals, and about eight punctuation marks." The writing tips, then, function as guidelines to use this code to create an experience for someone else. Through this code, the writer triggers visions and questions, and offers access to the mind of another person. Through this process the writer influences someone he or she has never met, maybe someone who is alive long after that writer died. Students rightly find this idea inspirational.

Writing In and Beyond the Classroom

I went to "good" schools as a kid, but I learned a lot more about writing outside of the classroom than I ever did in it. Truthfully, I barely remember a lot of what happened in my high school English classes (I hope none of my old teachers are reading this!). That's even true for some of my college classes. However, in both high school and college, I was an editor and writer for the school newspapers, which demanded that I read and write beyond the confines of class.

The school newspaper was rewarding in a way that I had never experienced in a traditional class. As an editor, I developed ideas for stories, assigned them to reporters and photographers, worked with layout artists and graphic designers, and did any or all of these jobs as needed. The best part was the "exhibition"—in high school the newspaper came out once a month; in college, we published twice a week. Each time, the entire newspaper staff anxiously awaited the response.

Once, I met an alumnus from my college several years after graduation, at a dinner at my house. We had never met before, so we chatted about common experiences from college. In our conversation, he unknowingly quoted a joke that I had written in the school newspaper

almost a decade earlier. I thought he was playing a joke on me—surely he must have known the connection. But he didn't. I pulled the copy of the old newspaper from my files and we stared incredulously at the coincidence. I was dumbfounded that he had read my article, found it funny, and had apparently been using the joke for years, until it finally came full circle and he told the joke back to me, the original author. Now that is a successful exhibition!

Looking back through those files brought another idea into focus—students save only what they care about. I have saved only a select few of the countless essays I wrote at any point in my academic career. After all of those humanities and social science classes, and all of the essays and research papers, I simply have no idea where most went. However, I do have a binder full of clippings from the local community newspaper for which I was a freelance reporter in high school, and boxes of high school and college newspapers that published my work. Soon, some of those papers will be twenty years old, yet I have been careful to move them with me to quite a few different states and across the country.

Publication as Leverage

Traditional newspapers may be dying in their print form as news moves to the Internet, but I believe that we should not allow student publications to die—or think web-based projects are effective replacements.

First, the death of professional print media may be somewhat overstated. True, the Internet is a much better place to find up-to-the-minute news than a printed newspaper. But for thoughtful analysis, magazines such as *The New Yorker* or *the Economist* are quite successful—both continue to boast strikingly high subscription rates. Amazon has sold millions of Kindles, but soaring e-book sales represent only one vibrant part of a larger publishing industry that generates $24 billion annually in America. Teachers who are quick to believe that print media are dying may simply be sensitive to a few changes—particularly the decline in educational book sales, which is a product of shrinking public budgets.

Second, when it comes to the in-depth exploration of ideas, books hold a place of respect for students. The permanent, physical nature of a published product provides a feeling of satisfaction not attainable on the Internet. Websites that can be edited up to (and after) the night of a project exhibition have not motivated my students the same way publishing has. My students say it to each other while we work, in tones ranging from questioning to celebratory: "This is going to be printed in the book?" or "This is going to be printed in the book!" The

permanence of the product informs the degree to which they take the project seriously.

Publications provide a coherent project that focuses students around practicing the behaviors used by professionals, which is a fundamental concept of project-based learning. Biology students must engage in the behaviors of biologists; art students must engage in the behaviors of professional artists; and so on. For humanities, this means trying on the identity of writer and editor—but a professional writer and editor, one who publishes his or her work for an authentic audience.

Part of the initiation into the world of writing is moving beyond one's most convenient audience. For nearly all students, their writing is read by a small group of people who are physically close and will discuss the work with them. I believe that this has the unfortunate side effect of allowing students to be loose with their writing, because the final "product" can be a conversation or comment in which they say, "Oh, no, I really meant…" For most students, the audience for their writing is their teacher, or maybe parents and a few friends. No professional writer writes solely for a group like this. While professional writers undoubtedly do include family and friends in their audience, they also write for a large group of people they do not know. This audience will probably never have the chance to sit down with the author and ask, "What did you mean in this part right here?" Instead, the writing has to stand on its own.

This is a fundamental lesson and important conceptual shift in the use of publishing to leverage high quality writing from students: the writing has to stand on its own. It has to be good enough as is, so a stranger can understand it. This realization is a significant step in engaging students to write for deep content as well as flawless mechanics. Although many of my students have authors they enjoy, not one that I know of has sat with that author and received his or her help in getting through a book. The professional knows this, and writes specifically to engage readers without having to say, "Well, what I really meant was…"

Authentic Standards

In the age of standardized testing, student publications maintain my "lower-case" standards—not State Standards, but professional and personal standards. A publishing teacher is standards-aware, but not Standards-subservient.

In the past two years, under my publishing-centered curriculum, my students' standardized test scores have risen. This is not a large enough sample from which to draw conclusions, but

it is not a bad trend. Also, I no longer teach repetitive forms of academic writing, such as the five-paragraph essay. Instead, professional models provide both rich learning experiences and engaging final products.

A better assessment of the value of publishing comes in the form of students' written reflections. Following our most recent publication, some students were critical of themselves, and some were critical of the project. But when I asked how the act of publishing impacted their approach to writing, students universally praised the publishing process as one that motivated them to strive for their best. One student's reflection addressed this theme: "The fact that we were publishing it just makes me more active in my critique of my own writing so I can catch my mistakes or misspelled words or improper grammar. Because I wouldn't want anything published with my name on it if it had mistakes. It just makes it seem sloppy." Another student wrote, "I wanted to make sure that my work was totally professional and the best material possible, especially since I didn't want to let down the family and two scientists that I interviewed and included in my article."

A second theme also emerged: publishing led students to care more about the work of their classmates. In all of my classes' publications, students regularly read, edit, critique and revise many other students' work, day after day, for no additional credit other than the satisfaction that the whole class will have a better final product. I have not seen altruism at this level in any other project in my class. Somehow, buried in the concept of a whole-class publication, is the idea that each individual student benefits when the whole class produces beautiful work.

After my class's most recent exhibition, student after student commented, "I can't believe we really published a book." They were proud of their newfound status as published authors. They opened the books slowly, careful not to crease the pages. Their parents clutched copies close to their chests. Most importantly, others got the books, too. And, as we read each other's work, and slowly hear back from teachers and parents and people they do not know, the students have taken an important step: they are writers who publish.

To learn more about student publishing and other projects, visit Randy Scherer's digital portfolio at **http://dp.hightechhigh.org/~rscherer**