
write beside them:

risk, voice, and clarity in writing with students

Penny Kittle



“Who dares to teach must never cease to learn.” ~ Cicero

“In 2008 our national graduation rate was 69%. In the prison population, 84% do not have a high school diploma. Regarding literacy skills: 43% of those at level one live in poverty, 4% at level five do. American classrooms have to change.”

~ from Alan Sitomer’s address to the NCTE convention, San Antonio, 2008.

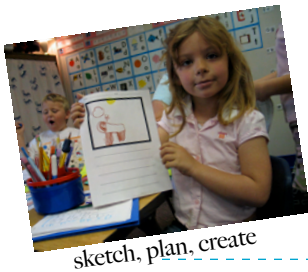
“Between 1996 and 2006, the average level of literacy required for all occupations rose by 14 percent. Both dropouts and high school graduates demonstrate significantly worse reading skills than they did ten years ago.” ~ Kelly Gallagher, *Readicide*, 2009.

“When you’re teaching you’re going to see people who cut corners, don’t work as hard as they should, or just complain all the time about everything. I believe you’ve got to do what’s right, every single day of your life, even if the rest of the crowd isn’t. Teaching is about honor and goodness and mercy. It really is. And no one will be watching you most of the time. You either live up to the calling of this profession or you don’t, and most likely no one will ever know but you. But it matters because the kids are counting on you.”

~ from *The Greatest Catch: a life in teaching*, Penny Kittle, 2005

“If you think education is expensive, try ignorance.” ~ Malcolm X

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sketch, plan, create

Time



time to write together

Tom Romano & Don Graves:
writing giants!

draft, revise, edit

Writing Workshop is predictable, so students plan for time to write and continue to imagine crafting when not in school.

The teacher:

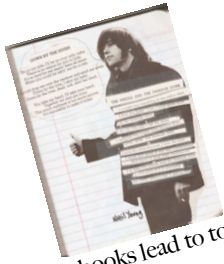
- understands what time looks like: what writers do with time to work (list, work in notebooks, read, collaborate on writing, confer with others, draw, storyboard, observe, think, wonder, procrastinate)
- considers balance of study and teaching, so writers have time each day to work independently
- knows the needs of her writers so that constant observation and reflection during the workshop leads to lessons designed to advance what they need at the moment: when to draw them together, when to add something to challenge them, when to give them more time to work, when to push to the finish
- listens to student feedback about conditions, structures, and plans

What this writer needs...

- time to decide what to say. If there's anything to say. Time to blast away, carving out an idea.
- time to breathe, relax, think, sketch. To make lists, to sift through all that was absorbed the day before and look at things more closely. To slow down and let my mind sort or sift or settle on something and gnaw away at it.
- time to count on. If something occurs to me during the day, I can store it away, knowing I'll have time to write soon, and the idea will resurface then.

What other writers say...

- "We rarely ask our students: tell us what has to happen around here in order for you to be willing to study hard, think deeply, and take real pride in your work?" ~ Robert L. Fried
- "Write fast—write badly—so you will write what you don't yet know you knew—and so you will outrun the censor within us all." ~ Don Murray
- "Writing is like that, I realize: to hold the pen and wait, then start, is like holding a roll of film. Something will come; it will bring from the past. I wait deliciously. And the thing that occurs depends partly on how much I hunger." ~ William Stafford
- "People don't know how hard it is to write, what a struggle to know what you want to say and then to say what you mean." ~ Jane Kenyon
- "The daily practice of craft sharpens the writer's vision and tunes the writer's voice. Habit makes writing easy." ~ Donald Murray
- "For me, writing is never linear, though I do believe quite ardently in revision. I think of revision as a kind of archeology, a deep exploration of the text to discover what's still hidden and bring it to the surface." ~ Kim Edwards



notebooks lead to topics

Choice



share thinking



storyboard thinking



consider student mentor texts

I select out of all the possible moments in my life, some experience that has formed me. (Randy Bomer, *Time for Meaning*) When I make a choice, I commit to crafting my thinking, working through process towards the best writing I'm capable of today.

The teacher:

- can explain the choices being made right now in her writing life.
- understands why and how a writer can get stuck on one topic.
- can find topics in any genre because she knows her own territories so well and is willing to take risks
- knows the futility of writing for no other purpose than to turn in an assignment--what that does to craft and joy and desire--and knows that voice comes from having something to say
- knows that all writers make bad choices at times & can get married to their own words and unwilling to delete them...has felt that useless circling when an idea is going nowhere, but won't let go

What this writer needs...

- choice in subject and the choice to stay stuck on one subject until I decide I'm finished.
- time to find a topic that I'm committed to... if I zip by this, the writing suffers.
- time to craft what I'm thinking in more than one form: to imagine which form fits what I'm trying to say. Do I write a letter or an essay--a memoir or an ode? I start one, then another. Trust me.
- the choice to abandon an idea and start on another--to not bring every piece to completion

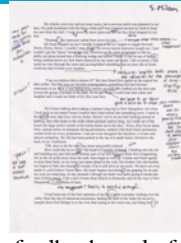
What other writers say...

- "With help, students are able to discover topics they deeply connect to and dig to find out more about these connections. This process makes their writing more honest, and also helps them think through the parts of their lives that are important to them. For some students, it might be the first time they realize that there are important subjects in their lives. Helping them take themselves seriously is crucial for them as writers and as maturing human beings." ~ Lucy Calkins
- "Boy writers need time and real choice in order to get comfortable and find their stride. Before we push or prod them to write this or that genre, using this topic sentence or that concluding paragraph, I say let's get out of the way and make space for boys to write their own subjects, including their own characters, plots, drawings, and jokes. This means creating classrooms that are less about us and more about them." ~ Ralph Fletcher
- "There is only one story of our lives and we tell it over and over again, in a thousand different disguises, whether we know it or not." ~ Pam Houston

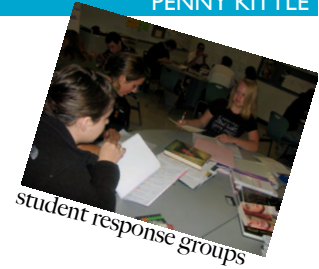


teacher conferences

Response



feedback on drafts



student response groups

Writers need feedback, not evaluation. (Donald Murray) Listen first. Listen to what I need help with, then encourage me with attention to my ideas and the possibilities in my work. Help me see differently.

The teacher:

- listens first. The writer knows more about the piece than the teacher.
- articulates what is working and why, helps a writer see the smart moves made in his piece
- plans for conferences, organizes workshop time to allow for a few minutes beside each writer
- teaches students how to confer well with each other: outlines hurdles and possibilities; practices
- values the response of students to her work; listens, records, and uses feedback from students in her drafts and shows students how it helps her consider her purpose, her audience, & her choices in craft

What this writer needs...

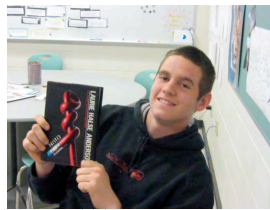
- gentleness. I'm giving you a draft I'm not sure of; don't crush me
- to believe in the possibilities of this piece
- tell me where my writing falters and where it sings, show me what is missing and what feels complete
- show me how you follow my thinking, see my experiences, respond to my ideas

What other writers say...

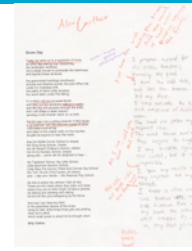
- "I must create a climate in the writing conference in which students can hear what they have to say so they can learn to listen to their own writing." ~ Donald Murray
- "Be brief; for it is with words as with sunbeams, the more they are condensed, the deeper they burn." ~ Robert Southey
- "Writing isn't playing King of the Mountain. When I sit down to write literature, all my teachers gather behind my chair and I can hear their snickers. All my classmates together with all the writers I admire, dead and alive, gather around. I can't write for this crowd. I can't write literature. I can only write this page. For myself. Making it as true and as graceful as I can." ~ Donald Murray
- "Reread with a pen or pencil in hand. Read aloud. Feel the words in your mouth. Listen. Your sense of how language should sound is a great ally. You'll hear when words make music; you'll hear when they're discordant. Make adjustments if you need to and be amazed and fulfilled at how well you are writing, honing language, tinkering and tuning. Cross out words. Move others around. Write anew in the ample margins and between the lines. You are crafting, creating." ~ Tom Romano



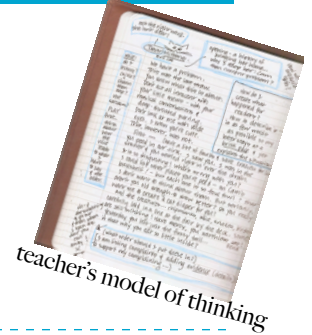
Vision



read like writers



imitate craft



teacher's model of thinking

Writers notice, imitate, create. We need to analyze the craft of writing, unpacking its construction and using that thinking to more carefully craft our own.

The teacher:

- reads voraciously, collecting texts that show delights in language and structure
- shows her process in the genre: thinking aloud about finding an idea, deciding how to organize it, then struggling through a draft and revisions, searching for meaning, refining voice. This model of process provides a map for students to follow when stuck; this is show not tell teaching.
- unpacks the construction of a text: can explain how the parts work together to create the whole
- understands the power and possibility in imitation
- uses published texts as well as student texts as models

What this writer needs...

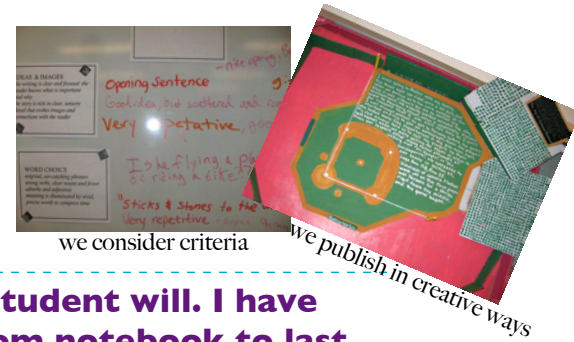
- vision for how others work
- vision for what I might write about and how to do it well
- vision for voices in genre—the use of satire or hostility or wise gentleness in story, essay, and poem
- to read a variety of writers in one genre so my mind expands with possibility
- to see that my ordinary life is alive with topics

What other writers say...

- “I challenged the children to use their writing time to write about topics they believed only children could write well about. They relished the challenge; they owned the turf. They trusted that they had important things to say. They breathed the details.” ~ Shelley Harwayne
- “End or begin a workshop by filling the room with lines of student language. Hear language, see language, say language, feel language, in order to help students write with voice, authority, and passion.” ~ Karen Ernst
- “Style is a matter of vision, not technique.” ~ Marcel Proust
- “Trust language. It lies within, ready to lead you. All those years ago, before you were praised or corrected, before you were shown the niceties of communication, language quickened in you. That fierce human need to name and say launched words. Remember that. And be brave on the page. Be a warrior with words. Trust the gush of language. Exercise self-generosity.” ~ Tom Romano



Expectations



I expect everyone to write well; I believe every student will. I have deadlines for each unit, so that writing moves from notebook to last draft, and there is an urgency in workshop each day.

The teacher:

- sets regular deadlines so students work towards completion
- knows (by conferring) where each writer is in the process—who needs nudging to meet the deadline—who needs help—who is ready to move on to another project
- celebrates the hard work of completion
- finishes a piece herself (not every unit) so she feels the challenge and terror of deadlines—of letting go of something that still isn't all you want it to be
- submits work for publication so she feels the weight and limitation of evaluation

What this writer needs...

- due dates... or else nothing ever leaves my notebook
- time to think between drafts so that the writing revises in my mind, free of tools and responses
- the pressure of an audience waiting—nothing gets me writing like an afternoon writing group meeting
- personal goals like fifteen minutes a day of writing or a finished piece as a gift for someone else

What other writers say...

- "There is an hour when the work, at last, must be passed in and the writer revealed. Writing is never completed: the process of revision, reconsideration and editing goes on until the final deadline is met." ~Donald Murray
- "To write you have to set up a routine, to promise yourself that you will write. Just state in a loud voice that you will write so many pages a day, or write for so many hours a day. Keep the number of pages or hours within reason, and don't be upset if a day slips by. Start again; pick up the routine. Don't look for results. Just write, easily, quietly." ~Janwilliam van de Wetering
- "Finish. Submit. Many have talent. Some begin; few finish. The field is left to those of us who have little talent and great stubbornness." ~Don Murray
- "Trust the process. If the process is sound, the product improves." ~William Zinsser
- "Write every day. Set time aside: a heroic hour or a vital five minutes... though you may not consider yourself a writer, you write. That's what matters. You are one of the meaning makers. You know writing from the inside. You can teach others." ~Tom Romano

Research-based writing teaching

from the work of Donald Murray

People don't know how hard it is to write, what a struggle it is to know what you want to say and then to say what you mean. Jane Kenyon

1. **Teach process not product.** The traditional English class appropriately deals with a product—finished writing. The writing class deals with unfinished writing, writing that is in the process of discovering meaning. Students must have the time to pass through the same stages of prewriting, writing, rewriting, and editing which writers have to pass through to achieve the products we examine in other parts of the English curriculum.
2. **Write yourself.** The writing teacher prepares for the writing class by using his or her own language to examine and share experience. The teacher understands the writing process because the teacher experiences it.
3. **Listen to your students.** The center of the writing course is the conference in which the student evaluates the draft and the teacher responds to that evaluation. Students who are experiencing the process understand it better than we can. They know what is going well, what isn't going well and they can, with our coaching, see how to improve their writing—to move closer to their meaning.

~ Donald M. Murray, 1977.

In the teaching of writing, the quality of work that the children do has everything to do with the teaching they receive. When we give children rich environments for learning to write *and* wise, assertive one-to-one coaching, children regularly produce work that is breathtaking. The good news is that the skills of strong teaching are within reach for all of us. ... when we see good writing, we know the explanation lies not in a child's genes but in the instruction the child has received. ~ Lucy Calkins, *The Nuts & Bolts of Teaching Writing*