

Improving Students' Writing: Or, "There ain't [sic] no such thing as 'Pre-writing'"

Students are natural writers, just as they are natural talkers.

Just as traditional classroom teachers have focused unlimited pressure upon students to "be quiet," traditional classrooms have inadvertently pressured children to become poor writers.

We might call this a "Conspiracy to Silence."

What is it that factory-model-teaching silences in a zeal for conformity and process control?

Creativity and Communication! That's what.

Creativity and communication are the enemies on the well-organized, well-run, "don't smile before Xmas" shop floor.

But if running a tight ship means zipping lips and clamping down on creative minds, what is it that the "factory-model teachers" get in return?

Unfortunately, the return on investment for the "Be Quiet!" consciousness is low. But, it is always easy to take comfort in the fact that "be quiet" grows yet another group of children that writes with the joy, pliancy fire and tenderness of a desert cactus.

So, if we keep spading the dry ground, one day, one of these children may blossom, and the rare flower will be beautiful.

How can noise-adverse teachers expect for children to write like "lovers" (of learning) if the teacher always has a headache? :-)

Let's call this the "pet" theory of writing.

Two types of pets are dogs and cats. Both kinds of animals are suited to be loving companions, but it is necessary to allow them to be what they are.

For example, if we attempt to train a dog to act like a dancing monkey, we will convert a willing, "I-want-to-please-you" pet into a quivering, frustrated, sullen and dejected...pathetic creature.

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If we attempt to train a cat to act like a dancing monkey, we will convert an independent, aloof, and self-contained pet into a scratching, biting runaway.

The dog would try to please, whimper, and fail. The cat would flee in disdain and a huff.

Fortunately, we have more puppy-children than kitten-kids, so the negative effects of production-line teaching puts more stress on the kids, rather than the teacher. But, beware the few clawing kiddies that scratch back at the teacher. These children will dish out more stress that they will take.

Beside the "Be quiet" damper upon children's writing, there are some other typical drags on writing. These include;

- The ideas written must be the right ideas
- There shouldn't be any mistakes in the writing
- The content should agree with the teacher's beliefs
- There is a right way to write
- Writing should fit the high-stakes test models so that the student can pass the state test

Another "wet blanket" over the flames of creative writing is "formula writing." (We review some books that focus upon this strategy later in this issue.)

Formula writing is the bedfellow of high-stakes testing and holistic scoring of students' writing. Our experience in Texas was that we created a generation of students who couldn't write, or at least that is what their employers said once these students graduated and moved into the working world. (Note: Texas has since dumped that strategy for another "testing initiative.")

And, the myth that children learn more when the classroom is quiet is false.

What teachers need to do is to increase the communication that children practice. This means that students need to talk and write in all subjects, all the time.

This means that student projects, instant conferences, team meetings, project planning sessions, consulting sessions, bargaining sessions...need to be ongoing. (Note: we are talking about the students participating in all of these activities, not just the teacher.)

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Timelines, schedules, deadlines, milestones and goal-achievement action plans need to be part of students' daily writing activities.

And, the collecting, organizing, analyzing of data and information need to be "fabricated" into tables, graphs, charts, glossaries and lists.

Tables can be a...

- Table of Contents
- Tabular Data
- Pivot Tables
- Truth Tables
- Schedules
- Addition, Subtraction, Multiplication Tables
- Periodic Charts of the Elements
- Conversion Tables
- Comparison Charts

You get the picture.

Graphs can be any of the software generated ones, plus...

- Timelines
- Calendar Graphs
- Project Plans (Gantt Charts)
- Trajectories
- Cumulative Data

Diagrams can be...

- Flow Charts
- Organization Charts
- Mind Maps
- Fishbones
- Mobius Strip Charts
- Johari Windows
- Two-dimensional, Four Quadrant Meta Charts
- Three-dimensional Cubes

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Student writing should contain all of these communication tools and devices. Of course, some tools and devices are better suited for certain content area subjects. This is the reason that writing should be an all-school-day strategy.

Writing is pervasive, crucial, continuous...and should not be compartmentalized to one corner of the Language Arts curriculum.

Writing is sharable. What's stopping your students from writing a Blog?

Writing also is a team sport. Could your students work together to author a WIKI?

Teachers do not need a formula to help students write.

Test and see if you let students write their way, and if you let students share in meaningful ways...whether their writing begins to spark, crackle and sizzle.

And, watch to see if, once students are engaged in meaningful communication...whether they ask for help in correcting the writing and making their writing fit the conventions.

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