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# Better Than You Found It:

Bridging the Gap Between Authentic  
Relationships and the Writer's Workshop

By Amber Miller



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## **Better Than You Found It:**

### **Bridging the Gap Between Authentic Relationships and the Writer's Workshop**

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A wise woman once said, “Education is for improving the lives of others and for leaving your community and world better than you found it.” That wise woman was Marian Wright Edelman, an activist, a scholar, a teacher, and to this current day a woman that devotes her life to servitude for children everywhere in the world. After years of working with children, I thought I knew what that quote meant. My limited mind believed that if I reached beyond the content mandated to be taught, reached beyond the standards, and extended my works hours beyond eight to four that somehow I would improve education for the twenty-one pairs of eyes eagerly waiting me in my classroom. But there was something that was missing, something that was hiding, like a penny wedged in between the driver’s seat and the arm rest, I could see it but it was lodged so deep between that I couldn’t get a good grasp on its copper edges. That penny was a symbolization of my relationship with my students. Though they were an often thought on my mind after leaving the third grade pod, my relationship with them was a counterfeit and somehow I needed to make it “authentic.” It was at the writer’s workshop where I met each of my students at home plate, pitched to them the content, gave them the free range to swing, and allowed for them to run the bases, meeting them at home plate. It was at the writer’s workshop where I learned that an educator was not just one who valued, but rather one who acted as a foster parent in a child’s home away from home.

**Planning My First Unit**

My objective was to plan a two week unit in Language arts. For days and days I researched content that I could teach to my students. A recent college graduate, currently doing her student teaching, four years of course work but still not knowing where to begin. I knew I had to have a product that would last two weeks but truthfully I didn't know where to start. Never before had I planned a unit, especially a unit when I had to think of all the activities I would do, and how I would present them in a way that kept the students attention. I knew that I wanted my lessons to be hands on, because it made classroom management problems seem minimal when it came to disciplining, but I still did not know where to start. In trying to look at resources that would help me uncover the secret behind planning, I came across *Learning the Write Way*, an article by Deidra Gammill. She described a technique that got students energized about writing and getting their experiences down on paper. This technique was called the "Writing to Learn Approach" as she said, "In writing to learn, students use language to shape, order, and represent their own experience to reach fuller understanding" (Gammill, 754). One approach in *Writing to Learn* was to have students use a reading journal and keep track of their thoughts from the book. If I could somehow get students into the habit of writing everyday they would see writing as necessary, expressive, and less of a burden, especially, if they were actually writing about things they enjoyed. Immediately upon reading the article I knew what I was going to do. Putting it altogether was going to be the challenge. It was like baking cookies from scratch for the first time. I had the ingredients, in terms of literature, books, and content I wanted to teach, but I didn't know how to put it all together and make a product that would be devoured by my students. I needed to have them invest in their writing, and continue to bank deposits into their investment. Borrowing more language arts material from my collaborating teacher I continued to build my repertoire of knowledge in the writer's workshop. My head became burrowed in those books for days upon days. As a result of this I chose to focus the students' writing on two traits, "voice" and "word choice" and I used

literature to help model for students the author's techniques in expressing his/her feelings, thoughts, opinions, expression, and word variety. The activities I used to engage students were whole group activities, dramatization, puppetry, call and response, and group work. Daily, I read books to the students where voice and word choice were evident and gave prompts about each book, where the children had to write in their reading journal a response to the given prompt.

On the first day of my unit I talked about voice. I really wanted the children to become energized in figuring out the definition of voice and what it meant for their writing. Putting together a PowerPoint I thought for sure that students were going to get it. It was colorful, included movement, music, and was interactive. After students listened to the PowerPoint they realized that voice was how the author expressed his/her feelings, thoughts, opinions, and the way they dragged the reader into the story by making them feel a part of it. Then I had students pretend to be judges on the American Idol show where I read to them two different paragraphs, one good and one bad. They then gave me a rating from one to five on the dry erase boards on how well I incorporated voice. Funny thing was my students either really didn't comprehend voice or they were trying not to hurt my feelings, because though one paragraph was good and one was bad, they still managed to give both paragraphs the same score. In trying to reform my teaching I read the paragraphs again, gave them a pep-talk and said they shouldn't worry about making me feel good for the sake of this writing. I remembered saying, "If it's bad, tell me it's bad. If you don't, I'll think it's good and continue writing like that. For example if I were to walk around with a banana on my head, wouldn't you tell me that it was there so I didn't look crazy?" After laughing the students then rescored, rendering lower scores for the poor paper and higher scores for the better paper with comments like "Great," "Excellent," and "Keep it up." At that moment I knew we were ready to move on to the next day, which is where I found out more about my students through the writer's workshop. Looking back on my talk with the students I realized that when I talked to them like

human beings, they could laugh, talk, and be real me. Being real through laughter made our relationship feel like it was heading closer towards authenticity on a continuum.

The next day I read a book to my students titled, “Diary of a Worm,” a picture book by Doreen Cronin. Trying to specifically focus on one component of voice I had the students play with five different emotions: hunger, excitement, anger, frustration, and fear. Students used note cards with each of the five emotions written on one note card. I stopped through pieces of the book asking students to identify the emotion the worm was feeling and a technique the author used to help them see that emotion. The note cards really helped hold each student accountable for their learning and I didn’t have any management problems other than an occasional student or two who tried to blurt out their answer in their excitement. In response to the book they had to draw an unknown emotion out of a box and write a story about that emotion, by showing and not telling. Emotion cards were picked at random, and through a deeper study of their reflective writing their writing revealed a rich treasure. Two students wrote prompts that stuck out like a needle in a haystack, or what my kids would say, “like a piece of hay in a needle-stack.”

### **A Deeper Look at Two Students**

John, a boy who was very aggressive when it came to sports had so much to offer the classroom. As a teacher I had noticed on several incidents where he told little lies about accidents he was involved in. When a group of four students complained about him hurting someone on the playground he denied it, though there was a little boy in the principal’s office with an icepack up to the right side of his head. In disciplining him in the classroom where he had to track his behavior by writing his name in a notebook and giving himself a checkmark, there were occasions when he would go back and trace his name just to make it look like he was in fact giving himself a checkmark. Quite the slick kid who would look you right in the face and say he didn’t do it, but you

know he did. Somehow that day when I was giving out the emotion cards he managed to get the emotion of “guilt,” so he made up a story about a little boy taking a piece of chocolate pie. He wrote, “My mom said not to eat the chocolate pie, but the next morning it was gone. I had a chocolate mustache, my belly hurt, I had a belly ache. I was soooo..... I wonder who ate it.” If I hadn’t have known that this little boy had tendencies of telling little fibs before then I might have totally dismissed it. But really this prompt was about his daily life. It was about struggling with something that at times he had no control of, until after it happened, and this writing was a way for him to confess. Giving him the opportunity to put his emotions on display and disclose his story to the class, I gave him permission to read his paragraph, without revealing to his classmates that he was the little boy in the story. It made him own up and confess without degrading him, and it gave him a public forum to disclose his secret to the world, without his audience even knowing it. That right there was power, but a power that gets overlooked so often for the sake of “keeping the curriculum moving.” Since that writing day I have had several conversations with him about telling the truth, even when it hurt. When I look for read-alouds now I look for poems and stories that help build his character, because I know this is a problem he struggles with. That is what a good teacher does. She reforms her teaching on the basis of knowing her students and trying to reach their needs. Without paying attention to him in class and paying attention to his writing in the writer’s workshop I would have never come to have had those discussions with him, never coming to have an authentic relationship with him.

Then there was Kacie. Her writing also stood out to me in ways that I had not imagined they would. In the past I noticed she was a student that needed attention, always asking for treats when the other kids were not in the room, always asking to do extra math problems with me in the class. Realizing that might not be fair I disregarded her pleas. She was given the same prompt as John, but the word she was given was “greediness.” In her prompt she had this man dress up as all

of these random characters and go repeatedly back to a hot dog stand just so he could get as many hot dogs as possible. Ironically she also had a tendency to want an abundance of things, like food from the classroom when students weren't there. She was usually the last person out of the classroom and always skipped to the door, closing it slowly with a "If I help you clean up can I get a snack?" Looking back at those incidents and her writing prompt I continued to figure out more intimate facts about her life. In another one of her prompts where she had to talk about her Halloween experience she wrote a page and a half account on how she spent time with her family. Realizing that family was important to her I continued to read and found that her uncle had just recently died and she spent a lot of time with her sisters. This charismatic little girl made her own lunch, rocked her baby sister to sleep when she cried, and taught herself how to accurately write her spelling words. Though just snapshots of her life the culmination of all of them made me start asking her questions about her home life. I asked her about her sisters, and why she took care of her little sister. I found that she was living in a single-parent house with her sisters, and that her mother was gone so often that she made her own lunch, watched her little sister, and then when the little sister cried she was the one that had to soothe her. In many ways she was like a mini-adult, and all of these snapshots, merely tiny fragments of her life started to make sense to me. A child growing up too fast with a lot of responsibilities. This information was vital for me because it signaled to me what was important to her and why she sought so much attention at school. Since that writing day I have come to value her personal life and things she needs in order to have a healthy childhood. Giving her more one on one time with subjects she lacks skills in (reading comprehension, and math), and just spending downtimes with her having conversations, showing her that people actually care about her. Those were all tiny things that I could incorporate in my daily schedule, that before I didn't do because there was so much to get done. Carl Anderson's article *Linking Assessment and Instruction: Designing Individual Learning Plans for Students* states "A teacher

who gets to know students in a writing workshop gathers information about them as writers. She then uses that information to construct multidimensional images in her mind of who the students are as writers at that point in their development" (Anderson, 141). Not only did her prompts tell me who she was as a writer, and what she liked to write about, but it also told me about her background, her hobbies, things that made her smile, and things that made her frown. Those things taught me how to have an authentic relationship with her, and it taught me how to make time because her ideas were just as valid as mine. Sure I could make her a better writer, but if at the end of the day I knew nothing about her and I didn't help to develop her character, how was I improving her education, and leaving her world a better place? In her home away from home my heart told me to give her back her in innocence, to give her something of me that I had not yet given her.

### **Summing it Up**

What I learned about education and my students far exceeded what I had ever planned for in my unit. I came into this experience with the sole purpose of giving my students more and improving their lives, I just didn't know how, but the Writer's Workshop painted the picture for what I needed to do. I had to put on each student's cloak of sadness, of terror, of fear, of opportunity, of morality and wear it religiously, thereby, forming an authentic relationship with them. That authenticity was the remedy for their sicknesses, their failures, anxieties, and depressions. Without the writer's workshop I'm not sure that I would have found that. It makes you start asking questions, that before you probably wouldn't have asked for the sake of too little time. In devoting my time the classroom became more "student centered rather than teacher centered," and that is the quality education which improves the lives of students (Gammill, 754). I am now ready to leave this world a better place.



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