

What to Do Next

By Amber Miller

This year I embarked upon the journey of being a first year teacher. Save for my year long internship year I had no real experience with what it meant to really be a teacher. Of course you teach lessons, find innovate ways to put them together, but no one ever teaches you how to teach it, or the records you must keep on each child along the way. So this year when I walked into my first paid teaching experience I was told that there was no set ELA curriculum. I was told that I had to teach six specific writing and reading genres and was not given the direction in which to venture off to, nor how to venture off towards that genre with my limited knowledge.

One area which presented itself as a struggle for me was conferencing with my students during the writer's workshop. During their actual forty minutes of writing I try and get around to my students to conference with them. I usually only get around to 3 to 4 of them a day. I have them read their writing to me and I give them two compliments and 1 teaching point. My teaching point involves something that I think they should continue to embark upon in their writing. Whether that be adding more adjectives, putting voice in their writing, or using dialogue with quotations, etc. Regardless of what that teaching point is I must teach that point until they are comfortable enough to use it consciously in their writing.

However, sometimes when I sit down and conference with my students I don't know how to give them the support that they need to revise their writing and make it their own. I allow for my students to write about what they want, but often I get empty two sentence writings, or a list of things they did throughout the course of the day. Most writing does not evolve into a working draft to be expounded upon. Each day just seems to be another page in their journal in which they can't wait to turn the page to. As I was reading, *For the Good of the Earth and Sun* I was impressed by the level of personal touch she had with her students. It's as if she knew them in their writing and not

just in their lives. Through writing I've realized that I can give my students all the teaching points in the world but if I don't help them to understand their writing, then their writing will never become deeper and much more of value to them. In helping them to understand their writing there are two things I can do to help them: I must help them question and I must help them to get to a point where they can re-vision in their writing.

Often my students really struggle with trying to get their idea down on paper. Sometimes they write what's in their heart and then find that they don't have much else to say about the topic, save but a few sentences. "The difficult task for me as a teacher is to confer with my students honestly, without writing the poems for them or becoming the leader in the dance" (Heard, 1989, pg. 39). If they don't have much to say I almost spoon feed them the answers, but really those answers are not their answers at all, only my own. What I have found is that I can ask them questions to get to the heart of what they want to really say. "What did this cat look like? How did it make you feel when he broke your heart?" These questions help to elicit more ideas in terms of content, real content to put in their writing. It also helps them to revise their original pieces to include more details and description in them. There is power in asking questions, giving ideas but not become irritated when our students don't give us the answers we desire.

In addition, another thing I can help my students to really understand their own writing is to ask them to re-vision those moments in their writing. Heard does this as she says, "Will you close your eyes again and tell me what you see in your mind, what you saw before when you saw your cat" (Heard, 1989, pg. 41). In doing this she helps for her student to uncover images that were lost so quickly in the twinkling of an eye. "Revision,' means literally seeing again; that's what Jason did in the second poem about his cat. Instead of listing more small facts—his cat's name, when he got him, his color—he 're-vised' the experience, pictured it and then re-experienced it" (Heard,

1989, pg.42). Essentially we as teachers have to model this to our students by talking them through the process as they write. Revisioning allows for teachers to meet their students at the event, at their level.

As teachers we must look beyond making each piece of writing better, we must fix the writer and make them healthier, whereas they can transfer all of their knowledge from one writing to another. Heard says, “I became a listener; as Lucy says; I started to teach the writer of the poems, not the poems themselves. I stopped trying to fix each one and thought more about the larger issues I could teach each student, according to where he was as a writer” (Heard, 1989, pg. 39). By teaching the writer we can teach the whole person, and by teaching the whole person we can teach the writer.

Poem from My Personal Narrative

February 2nd

By Amber Miller

3 Months earlier
Kidney Failure
I thought she had it all together
Hurt...internally...needing something but unable to get it
And that's when we got the call

A Wednesday
A cold day in February
Yet the sun was in the sky
A message appeared on the intercom
Summoning me to the office

My parents heads hung low
“We have to go NOW!”
Two hours of endless silence
All to arrive at the transparent sliding doors of the dismal hospital
Two more hours passed by...

TICK
TOCK
TICK
TOCK

Doctor's hands were clutched together
Fingers intertwined
Eyes not making eye contact
And then their voices uttered the words

Thump
My father was brought to his knees
Water gushed from his eyes
Whimpering cries from a 48 year-old man
As my mother grabbed him up in her arms

Trying to hold back her own tears
She just let him cry and cry and cry
Each tear hitting the lens of his transparent glasses
One of three times I've ever seen him cry

Never close to her
Yet damaged by his hurt
Damaged to the core
Which no band aid could ever heal

His puddles of tears hit my heart
Breaking it that day
His tears were the bridge
Connecting my heart to my grandmother's

In taking apart my narrative of my grandmother's death and putting it into a poem I realized that before I even started the task that it was daunting to me. Before I even started writing I felt defeated because, "how on Earth was I going to take a part an emotional rollercoaster and sum it up within two hundred words?" It didn't even seem possible. As I looked at the first two sentences I chose, "3 months earlier" to set up the mood in my writing and from there my heart was lifted with the right words to keep. I knew I wanted my poem to have a heartrending feeling, yet hopeful enough to want to reconnect what I lost to what I never really had with my grandmother.

As I was reading my own poem the first draft sounded more like a poem than anything else. It sounded like something that wasn't broken up into stanzas that made sense or were purposeful; it just seemed as if it was there. That's when I revised my piece. I broke apart whole sentences into

fragments, and broke them apart into powerful illusions that illustrated my feelings at that time. But I had to be very careful as to not say too much, but to say just enough.

After starting my first two lines my uneasiness flew away. I broke apart sentence after sentences and summed it up with just a few words. I could use fragments, bad grammar, my own talking and language and still it was a poem and “just right,” to me. With this style it didn’t seem as if it had to be totally right, but it just had to say the gist of what I was trying to say. And I think I did it. I think I connected my own feelings with the feelings of my father and his loss.