

Jason Griffith: 2012 Edwin Hoey Award Nominee Narrative

In his seminal essay “The Trouble with Television,” journalist Robert MacNeil writes, “almost anything interesting and rewarding in life requires some constructive, consistently applied effort.” Besides having taught 8th grade English Language Arts for the past nine years, I’ve also had the fortune to coach the middle school cross-country team as well as the high school swim team. What draws me to these sports as a coach and athlete is that they are reciprocal: effort equals results. Not effort in terms of blind, driving labor, but rather smart and focused effort involving constant goal setting along with reevaluation, reflection, and refocusing. There are many similarities between this hard work paradigm from athletics and the literacy education of my 8th grade students as well as my own career as an English Language Arts teacher.

The first similarity lies in identity. Identifying oneself as a runner means more than simply running for fitness; runners consider long-term training plans, nutrition, rest and recovery. The same is true for writers. When students are given a writing assignment, many complete it, turn it in, and forget about it; while writers consider ways to improve their craft from one assignment to the next and make lists of potential topics, interesting quotations and characters, and notable observations. I want my students to identify themselves as writers. I promote the Scholastic Writing Contest because of its focus on choice and student voice. I encourage them to submit to *the Labyrinth*, a student publication of writing and artwork that I co-founded at our school, and I invite them to read at an 8th grade poetry reading I host at a local coffee shop annually. I know that if a middle school student wins a Scholastic key, reads an original poem in front of an audience, or publishes a short story or personal narrative in our little journal, a life-long writer has been born. But it's not always about the product; just like the practice of running or swimming keeps a body healthy, a student grows a lot through the creative process. I try to model the value of the process, regardless of the outcome. I share my own writing with students and invite their comments and criticism on my stories, poems, and articles (which improves my work). I share my rejection letters from publications and contests to show that I understand these frustrations. My students know, then, that they are a valued part of a literary community and their feedback and effort are respected, which helps when we conference about their work.

Not only does identity factor into writing, but also into reading; it's important that students know that their opinions and experience matter when responding to literature. Louise Rosenblatt said, "There is an element of creativity in even the simplest reading act." Readers create meaning and make connections between texts, to their own lives, and to the world. It's my job, then, to help guide connectivity. I love to show film clips to my students; when we read "Flowers for Algernon," we watch parts of *I am Sam* to examine similar protagonists, and while reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, we watch *High Noon* and *12 Angry Men* to view other characters like Atticus who are willing to stand up against the crowd. To bring the verdict scene of *To Kill a Mockingbird* to life, we walk to our county's old courthouse and put student readers in the judge and jury boxes which builds a real-world connection to the text as well as to local history. During our short story unit, small groups of students create film parodies of stories they've read from our *Literature* text which we screen for audience choice awards during a student film festival. When students can infuse their personalities and culture into their reaction to reading, they see its broader relevance.

Another thread of connection regarding constructive effort is effective coaching. Both students and teachers, like athletes, need guidance from experienced and knowledgeable professionals. For me, NCTE and the NWP have provided incredible networks of professional guidance. Each time I attend an NCTE convention, I return with notebooks filled with ideas on how to become a more effective educator, and becoming an NWP fellow has helped me to bring my own identity as a writer into my classroom. These networks help me to become a more effective mentor to my own students by nurturing constant refining of ideas and practices based on reflection from past experience. Reflective practice was certainly a theme when I earned National Board Certification, a process which made me very aware of both my strengths and weaknesses as an educator. For example, the board certification process showed me that I need to continue to find ways to encourage participation from all students. This year, my students chose persuasive topics to debate through online threaded discussion which allowed all student voices to be aired, and students were able to refine topics, identify objection, share resources, and receive feedback from peers before composing a traditional persuasive essay. Being well-mentored allows me to better coach my students' efforts.

Athletes, students, and teachers all benefit from collaboration. Another reason I'm drawn to the sports of swimming and running is that they focus on self-improvement, but one swimmer or runner cannot win a meet alone; individual performances contribute to a group effort. Often, individuals are inspired by their teammates to excel, which, in turn, helps the team. As teachers, each of us shines individually in our classrooms, but collectively, we are charged with educating the future of society; therefore, it benefits us to work together. I've been honored to be able to share some of my best practices at NCTE conventions as well as state and local conferences. Being among creative and accomplished educators encourages me to be at my best, and often these gatherings allow me to collaborate on proposals with teachers from my school, district, and local writing project site to share collective wisdom, which further enhances our professional relationships. As professional reading is another fantastic avenue for collaboration (and another source of my own professional development), I hope to share some of my ideas through publications in the near future and have recently had some proposals accepted for chapter submissions to multi-authored books.

A final comparative aspect is the opportunity to showcase effort through performance. Just as runners and swimmers train to race, providing opportunities for students to perform helps them to contextualize and demonstrate their learning. One of my favorite activities within our poetry unit is to teach students how to write a 12-bar blues song allowing them an authentic task to demonstrate rhythm, rhyme, and figurative language. This activity culminates with students performing their songs on stage in front of their peers with me playing guitar in the background. Other students join in the performance by reading about musicians and songs which have personally inspired them, perhaps the most enthusiastic response to a writing assignment all year. Allowing students to perform enhances literary identity and community.

Middle school students are developing their mature personalities, and I want literacy to be a part of those. My ultimate goal for my students is the same as for myself; I want us to take part in the larger conversation. I want my students to recognize their roles in shaping a constantly-growing Democratic society. We do not write, converse, perform, and publish only to earn grades or praise, but rather, because consistent, constructive effort as literate citizens contributes to the evolving consciousness of our world.