Writing to Change the World: Teaching Social Justice through Writer’s Workshop

Graves Award winner Lily Diamond discusses ways in which she integrates issues of social justice during writer’s workshop.

I have taught sixth grade in a charter school in East Palo Alto, California, and fifth grade at an independent school in New York City. Despite the differences in contexts across these two cities, I have found that my upper elementary students find issues of social justice to be particularly compelling. By integrating themes of social justice throughout our narrative and persuasive writing, I am able to support students’ passion for activism and belief in the impact of their voices.

I began my journey as a teacher in California. I taught sixth grade armed with my passion for social justice. I hoped that by providing my students with a deeper understanding of the issues in our world, they would feel empowered to resolve them. Writer’s workshop was at the heart of our classroom community. My students wrote stories about surviving cancer and watching loved ones get arrested. They made websites about teen activists while simultaneously learning about child labor and girls’ right to an education. We published a collection of short stories together. Writing transformed our classroom into a learning community where students felt that their voices were truly important.

After teaching in California for four years, I moved to New York to teach fifth grade. I started the year with personal narratives to build community and reflect on the most meaningful moments in our lives. When I teach students that their work is meaningful and purposeful, our learning community becomes more invested and engaged. To foster this burgeoning sense of purpose, I integrate themes of social justice across both fiction and nonfiction writing. I emphasize the power of writing as a way to make one’s voice heard and, ultimately, as a means to change the world. For middle schoolers, who are naturally aware of fairness, this work is a way to understand why certain inequities exist. They notice, for example, the discrimination that exists around them. When we openly explore, discuss, and write about this issue, it inspires them to make change.

Telling a story that conveys deeper meaning takes courage and a sense of trust. I model such risk taking in my own writing by sharing small moments of issues I’ve faced, such as a third-grade bully, family relationships, and a fight with a close friend. As I reveal myself to students, comparing my own small personal tragedies and triumphs to those in beloved mentor texts like Cisneros’s “Eleven” (1992) and Jiménez’s “Inside Out” (1997), they
begin to see the universality of certain social justice themes.

To encourage the crafting of meaningful stories from the start of the writing process, we begin by brainstorming social issues we have encountered in our lives, such as bullying and friendship. Then students generate small moments connected to the issues most pertinent to them (Calkins, 1994). For example, one of my students immediately began drafting a small-moment story about a soccer game. Through writing conferences where we talked about what his story was really about, he was able to uncover the heart of his story. His narrative transformed into a reflection of a time when he let his team down. He wrote:

I stood up slowly. I was still goalie at least. I played while tears ran down my face. For the last few minutes of the game we didn’t score 1 goal. But they didn’t score a goal either. We still lost though 2–1 . . . . I thought to myself it’s ok to lose the game if you have fun. I was proud that I did my best.

This first unit lays the foundation for leading a writerly life, where students become acutely aware of the way their lives intersect with important social issues. They begin to align themselves with certain causes, which allows us to establish a community that seeks deeper understanding.

Persuasive writing is perhaps my favorite genre to teach. Students select their own inquiry topics to research, generating debatable questions about an issue of their choosing. After their research, they argue in defense of initiatives; examples have included an effort to reduce the number of plastic bags used by the city and an initiative to generate potential steps to resolve the persistent gang problems in the community. They gather, sort, and rank evidence. They respond to counterarguments, hold debates, and look for patterns across their sources. We talk at length about who to target with their argument in order to actually implement change. For example, one student sent an email to the Nepalese government:

Dear Bidhya Devi Bhandari,

I am writing this letter to inform you that climbers and Sherpas are dying because of little training from climbing other mountains and lack of experience. More than 300 people have died climbing Mount Everest and more are dying as you read this letter. Climbing Mount Everest is dangerous and I am writing this letter to prove it.

As students develop their own persuasive voices, they also become more critical of the arguments of others. Whenever we read texts together, students practice identifying and analyzing the arguments presented and determining the strength of the evidence provided. When students challenge and question ideas and texts, they develop critical thinking skills and begin to position themselves as active learners and citizens.

At the end of each school year, I ask students to reflect on their progress and growth. One student recently shared, “This year I learned that in writing I get to be me.” This is my purpose as a writing teacher: to teach my students that through writing, we can develop our unique voices in order to share our lives, communicate our ideas, and most important, change our world. Donald Graves is known for saying, “You have a story to tell.” From California to New York and charter to independent school, nothing really feels truer than these words as we work toward a better future. It is our responsibility to help youth see the value and power in their words and ideas as an early step to social activism.

References

Lily Diamond, new NCTE member and fifth-grade teacher at The School of Columbia University, has been named the winner of the 2016 Donald Graves Award for Excellence in the Teaching of Writing. She can be reached at ldiamond@theschool.columbia.edu.