Some Things a Poet Does: Sharing the Process

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“And their writing gives adolescents a canvas on which to capture and consider their lives so far…”

Nancie Atwell (2015, p. 53)

Before I can authentically ask students to “capture and consider their lives so far,” I must find ways to share my process for capturing and considering my own. Sure, it means sharing my own writing process, with its starts and stops and very rough drafts. However, I recently learned it can also mean sharing my process for dealing with the rough starts and stops of life, including grief. Through Atwell’s (2015) essential lesson, “Some Things a Poet Does When Trying to Write a Good Poem,” my students and I learned the foundational lesson that writing is a process, but we also learned that it is more (Atwell, 138).

A Teaching Opportunity

In 2015/2016, I had the opportunity to teach three 90-minute ELA blocks, where the same groups of eighth graders met once for English and once for reading. Because I met with the same blocks of students twice per day, I had the freedom to choose when to focus on reading and when to move our attention to writing. This flexibility allowed me to truly embrace the workshop approach for the first time in my 20-year teaching career. It was with great enthusiasm that I rolled up my sleeves and dug into Atwell’s latest In the Middle lessons.

With a formidable amount of preparation for the first days of writing and reading workshop, I kept busy recreating handouts and deciding where and how to organize folders and writer’s notebooks, as well as organizing our classroom library and supplies in a way to make them accessible to students. Additionally, to help model writing as process, I wanted to follow Nancie Atwell’s example and bull my way through a new poem with multiple drafts. But with my mind fixated on organizing for a new school year and lesson planning, I was heavily into analytical ways of thinking. When my thinking is thus occupied, the creative side of me that loves to write poetry grows very quiet until an event of some emotional import propels me forward.

My Poem

When the school year began, such an event was already in motion with my first grandchild, Fletcher. By September, we knew that he was in serious trouble. His heart was taxed by a rare condition that would eventually take his life before it began. Carrying this grief had become a normal part of my days. While I wanted to write a fresh poem for my students, I certainly did not plan to write about this sad event. I had not yet processed it—we were still going through it.

However, one mid-September day after school, a friend and colleague of mine needed my help. She had recently become a grandmother and was managing a baby carriage, holding her one-month-old grandson and trying to pack up a multitude of school things to take home. As I watched her struggle, the thought, I do not want to hold that baby, rattled throughout my being like a broken record. But before I knew it, I heard myself volunteering, “Here, let me help.” As my friend loaded up her car, I held her grandson. Holding that baby boy, warm, sweet, and so alive, lit my imagination with what it might be like to hold my own precious grandson. Later that evening came the poem, tumbling out of me sad and raw onto the pages of my own writer’s notebook.
Over the next couple of days, I wrestled with whether to share something so emotional with my eighth-grade students. While writing the poem was a way for me to make meaning of a traumatic life experience, I feared it might be a little overwhelming for them. Writing a poem about my dog seemed like a much safer topic. Yet there was something about the poem that called out to my writing self. Revising it felt important, purposeful. Writing became an action I could take, despite the helplessness I felt. The topic was authentic and from my heart. If I wanted students to write from their hearts about topics that matter, shouldn’t I model that? So, despite my initial misgivings, my poem about grieving Fletcher is the poem I shared with my students.

I spent the following weekend revising and polishing. Seven drafts later, I made copies of various stages of the poem: writing off the page (prewriting), rough drafts (Figures 1 and 2), final copy (Figure 3), and a title brainstorm. After stapling them in the order I expected students to organize their own pieces (oldest draft on the bottom, newest on the top), I made enough copies for each student to be able to study, highlight, and mark up.

The Interview/The Lesson

I explained to each block of students about my grandson’s circumstances and how he became the topic of my poem. “But this lesson is not about Fletcher or my family’s grief. This is a lesson about trying to write a good poem.” After reading the final poem twice (Figure 3), I handed out highlighters. For the next five minutes, students read through the different versions of the poems, starting with the earliest stages and working toward the final. “As you read, notice the changes from one version to the next. What changes do you see? What questions do you have about the changes?”

My classroom is set up with eight round tables, where students sit in groups of three to four. Each table worked together to generate interview questions. They were asked to create a list of at least three. That way, if another table asked the same question, they’d still have a chance to contribute. “Remember to ask questions about my writing and the choices I made as a writer.” Once most groups seemed ready with at least three questions, we began the interview.
Sitting on a tall wooden stool, I called on one table at a time to ask their first questions, taking time to answer each question before calling on the next table. Each block responded slightly differently with the changes they noticed and the questions they asked, but each interview unfolded in a similar way. Despite my reminders to keep their questions about the writing, someone inevitably expressed personal concern for me and my family. Questions like Did you cry when you found out? and How is your daughter doing? were asked. But so were questions about my choices as a writer.

Brad in Block A asked, “What exactly is a ‘Title Brainstorm’?” (Figure 2).

“A title brainstorm? That’s something I’m just learning about from Nancie Atwell.” Looking around the room, I saw mostly interested expressions. “Have you ever found it difficult to think of a title?” Several heads nodded up and down. “Me too! So, as I was trying to figure out what title to give this poem, I sat for a couple of minutes and made a quick list of possibilities. I didn’t think too hard, just jotted down what came to my mind.”

Tucking her wavy, blonde locks behind her shoulders, Kelly in Block B asked, “Why did you leave out the stanza about his smallness and legs and arms curled up?” (Figure 1).

“Well, while I liked those details in my early drafts, they seemed to give way to other details that seemed more important as the poem took shape.”

It was Craig, tall and lanky, in Block C who asked one of my favorite questions: “Why did you take out the word heartbreaking?” (Figure 1).

“Well, there’s this thing in writing that we are going to practice this year called ‘show vs. tell.’ A writer can make a conclusion for readers and explain it with a telling word like heartbreaking. Or, a writer can use descriptive details to paint a picture . . . and let readers draw their own conclusions. My hope was that you could feel my heartbreak without me using the word.”

Each interview lasted between 15 and 20 minutes, leaving plenty of time for extra questions after the first round. To conclude the lesson, I handed out 3-x-5 index cards. Each student wrote down one thing he or she learned from the interview. At the end of the day, I typed their words and created a class document titled, “Some Things a Poet Does When Trying to Write a Good Poem.” Since I taught three blocks, I typed three separate lists—one for each group of adolescent writers. I am still struck by the power of publishing student work and their collaborative work together.

The next day, students added their class lists—the lessons they had learned and the advice they had connections from readwritethink

In this lesson, students interact and play with language while writing poetry using generative writing loops, which are a type of poetry circle. In these groups, students interact to learn and apply poetic conventions and forms, and this interaction results in improved understanding and development of social skills. While generative writing loops can be used to write any kind of poem, this lesson focuses on a free verse poem and an Italian sonnet. The student groups can be used throughout the year to stimulate interest in poetry and to help students actively learn poetic terms, conventions, and traditional forms.

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composed—to their writing folders. Then they took turns in a jump-in read, reading aloud each thing listed. Afterward, they went back to their personal copies and highlighted the three or four lessons they found most significant.

While this lesson seemed to be about poetry on the surface, it was about so much more. It served as a springboard into writing workshop—leading students to generate topics they cared about, to revise with purpose, and to begin to think about writing with their readers in mind.

What We Learned

In reflecting on this lesson, I have compiled a new list representing all three blocks. The lessons learned seem to fit in three emerging categories: 1) generating authentic or meaningful writing, 2) utilizing writing as process, and 3) crafting writing with readers in mind. What follows are many of the things my students learned, organized into those categories.

Generating Authentic or Meaningful Writing

- Put what your heart is thinking on paper.
- Write about what matters.
- Create meaning.
- Consider using real-life events.
- Put feeling and empathy into it.
- Think of someone in the moment to imagine someone else.
- Think about your life experiences, even problems and challenges, when looking for a meaningful topic.
- Write from your heart.

Utilizing Writing as Process

- Write off the page.
- Think long and hard by listing and brainstorming.
- Think about making things sound better as you revise a lot in your writing.
- Write something down and if it doesn’t sound right, cross it out and try something different.
- Consult with other people about your writing.
- Write several drafts.
- Draft, revise, and draft some more.
- Revise for word choice and word order.
- Take out what is unnecessary.
- Collect your thoughts as you write and factor in the functions and purpose of writing.
- Re-read what you have written and think about what works and what doesn’t.
- Think about the title. Titles are important.

Crafting Writing with Readers in Mind

- Think about what you want your readers to feel.
- Write with great detail.
- Think about structure.
- Keep it short and simple, yet understandable.
- Connect with your readers’ emotions.
- Stay focused on your topic.
- Think about your reader when you revise.
- Communicate a sense of feeling without naming that feeling.
- Show vs. Tell allows your readers to draw their own conclusions based on descriptive details rather than telling or explaining.
- Write about what is real to connect with your readers.

Impact on Student Writing

As I peruse final portfolios from 2015/2016, the student exemplars I kept from some of their best work, I see the lasting impact of this lesson. Students were more willing to revise and to revise with their readers in mind. Most importantly, they learned to generate meaningful topics they cared about. Kristen wrote about her grief in losing a best friend in a tornado that devastated our city. Kyle wrote about “an arc of shimmering light” capturing the silhouette and “utter joy” of a “father and son fishing in the morning.” Anna placed first in a writing contest about escaping her worries through dance. For Bre, it’s music and the “imperfect sound of a broken chord” that carries her into another world “full of memories, fantasies, and emotion.” Drew, who hated most of the poetry we read all year, found meaning in his own poem about the need
for diversity and how others should be themselves. Writing had, indeed, become a “canvas on which to consider and capture their lives.”

This essential lesson was about so much more than writing poetry. My students had become deep thinkers, genuinely interested in making meaning out of their life experiences. By taking the time to model my own messy process of drafting, revising, and editing, my students grew more willing to create multiple drafts and wrestle with the craft of writing. By sharing my personal and emotional events, several of my students learned the power of writing to help process and cope with grief. Finally, in writing with my students—creating a text with words and ideas we generated together—we embarked on a journey of taking our thinking seriously, learning from one another, and becoming authentic writers.

**References**


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