

2004 NCTE Donald H. Graves Writing Award Essay

When I first discovered the existence of the Donald H. Graves Writing Award for Excellence in the Teaching of Writing, I wasn't sure I should apply. It wasn't because I didn't feel confident in my ability to teach writing; rather, I wasn't sure I could properly explain in a 2,000 word essay the intricacies and subtleties of my students' writing progress. I'm willing to try, but, in telling my students' stories of progress I first need to explain what teaching writing means to me.

Teaching writing is a tough business. It requires far more reading, reflecting, and writing than any other subject area I've ever taught. It's time-consuming, exasperating, frustrating, and yet at the same time, incredibly rewarding. An inspirational writing teacher gives endless supplies of encouragement and makes students understand that through the act of writing they have the potential to change the world. While I'm not sure I inspire my kids like that every day, at least I walk into my classroom each day with that ambition.

What defines good writing? Writing means so many different things to different people. To me, I know I have good writing in front of me when I feel like I have gotten to know and understand the author a little bit better. I know it's *really* good writing when I hear the person's voice whispering in my mind. And finally I know the piece is truly excellent when goosebumps lift up the hair on my arms and my heart beats so loud I can't hear anything else.

As I write this paragraph, the school year is coming to an end and June is quickly approaching. I'm sorry to see these students move on because through their writing they've become people I really care about. Through their writings, I know how LaToya made dinner for herself and got ready for school each winter morning when her mother started drinking again. I know how badly Lizzie felt when Luis dumped her by email in order to date a seventh grade girl. I remember how Kylie became so quiet after she came back from Sweden and then learning from her writing entries that her grandmother had just died of cancer. Those are things my students share with me in writing that they don't tell me in person. Not only do I feel privileged to know these kids, I feel privileged to be their writing teacher because their writing is my portal into their lives.

And while the seventh grade English teacher is talented and experienced and has a host of exciting, new writing opportunities waiting for them, I'm saddened to see them leave me. These children have worked so hard this year I'm not sure how to choose just three portfolios. What criteria do I base my decision on? A well developed short story, the research paper on recycling, the book review on *Bud, Not Buddy*? Perhaps I'll just start with the goosebumps.

Student A — I chose work from this boy's portfolio because I value this student's place in my class tremendously. I admire the way he has gradually taken risks with his writing, no matter how painful, and by doing so he opened the door for others to do the same. I've included his writing in this application because to me, he's the epitome of courage.

"Student A" started the year writing the "I am a Hopeful Jewish Boy" poem and though I appreciated the poem, I saw him write it in less than ten minutes. Part of me knows that when inspiration hits, the fact that fingers fly doesn't mean the quality of the writing is inadequate. Writing doesn't have to be slow in coming; however, I have to admit that I was a bit disappointed with the final product. Could it be because he spent more time on the internet looking for pictures to illustrate his piece than actually writing the poem? When I read the poem, it felt wooden; it was as if he took the safest route possible.

But as the winter semester turned to spring, I came to realize "Student A" needed to take a safe route initially. Within the safety circle we created during the fall semester, he began to take more risks in his writing. He began to try various writing techniques such as varying his sentence structure and using metaphor. More importantly, however, was the fact that he started to let us into his world, the world of a twelve-year-old boy who misses his father more than he can imagine humanly possible.

I didn't teach "Student A" how to express his innermost feelings on paper. I didn't say to the class one day, "Okay, class, write about the most painful experience in your life. Tell me about it. Feel that pain and anger and frustration all over again... this time for *me*." I can't take credit for the raw emotional risk he took in his writing this year. He took that risk all by himself, in front of me *and* in front of his peers.

Although I may not have explicitly taught "Student A" how to express his private pain on paper, I do hope that I provided this young boy with the security, comfort, and reassurance to share his heartbreak within our community. I can also hope that "Student A" felt our writing class empowered him as a writer. I know he empowered others and his writing continues to give me goosebumps.

Student B — "Student B" had solid writing skills before sixth grade, before she came to our school, before she ever walked into my classroom. However, during the course of a year together she has become more adept, more organized, and more confident in her skills. Her fifth grade report card stated how solid her writing abilities were; however, she had been having serious social issues at her old school and she was becoming increasingly depressed. She hated everything about her old school—the teachers, the other students, even the way writing was taught. Yet, things changed once she switched schools. One of the first paragraphs she wrote for me expressed how happy she felt in our school. Not only did she choose the topic herself, but she had only been at Trevor Day for a couple of weeks when she wrote it! I knew from those nine sentences that this girl was special and I was in store for quite a wonderful year with her.

"Student B" used her writing abilities to make connections with her new classmates. They were impressed with her facility with the language and her ability to clearly articulate her thoughts. When she wrote book reviews, they read the books she liked; if they had already read the book, she wrote what they were thinking but didn't have the ability to articulate. She was a prolific poet—at one point she wasn't even afraid to stand up and perform a rap she wrote in front of the other students! With the more mundane writing tasks of finding quotes to support thesis statements, "Student B" skillfully helped her new classmates and eagerly showed them how to analyze the quote as well as give its context. To me, "Student B" is a great example of how a person can use her writing skills to make a place for herself in a new environment and reach out for new friendships. I'm including this new student's work not only because of its very high quality but because the act of writing has been instrumental in helping this child assimilate into our community. Her writing ability and how she has used that ability this year exemplifies to me the true power of writing.

Student C — The writing from the third student reminds us all what it's like to be eleven years old. Her writing deals with love, popularity, friendships, and insecurity. NYC kids, I'm afraid, grow up far too fast and often seem like sophisticated pint-sized adults rather than children.

In September "Student C" wrote a very brave *Who Am I?* poem (a formulaic writing assignment I start every year off with). Some children use the form to get them started, while others disregard the form or change it to suit their needs. "Student C" changed the form to fit her style which I appreciated. This first poem she wrote set her apart from the other kids and yet unified us with its honest emotion. Her poem exudes confidence and insecurity simultaneously. During our recent poetry unit this May, her writing once again impressed me; her voice is far stronger and much more intense these days. Her sharp-edged imagery and realistic portrait of adolescent life in New York make her work some of the best poetry I've ever seen a sixth grader write.

In addition to this student's poetry, I've included a short story she wrote from a winter short story unit we did. While I don't believe it is her best writing, "Student C" worked very hard on this piece and it is easy to see that she has a solid understanding of the structure of short story. She kept the number of characters down, there is only one conflict, and her main character changes from the beginning of the story to the end. I have to laugh at the topic of her story since during the year I had my humongous wild, unruly hair tamed with a special straightening process. (I have to wonder if our conversations about my eternal quest for straight hair inspired her sweet story.)

Closing thoughts:

I've enclosed an article I published in last summer's *Language Arts* (July 2003), "[Discovering the Ending in the Beginning](#)," about a short story unit I did with my fourth grade class. In writing the article, I used Donald Graves's writing to inform my research on revising. I chronicle my attempts at helping the students understand more about story structure in an effort to write more effective endings to their stories. Now that I am teaching sixth grade this year, a host of new issues have surfaced.

I wonder about the effectiveness of peer revision with adolescents where it often seems social interests outweigh academic concerns. I wonder also about how I can best effectively teach a student suffering from trichotillomania to deal with the stress of writing workshop. Her compulsion to pull out her own hair intensifies every time I bring up peer revision. And when I look at this practically bald child sitting in front of me, filled with anxiety about a conference with me or a revising session with a peer, I notice the limitations in our pedagogy. For her and others, I am compelled to research my own classroom and teaching, to question what I understand about the writing process, and to constantly reflect on the way I teach writing.

It's hard to put into words how much writing means to me and my sixth grade students. All I know is that each day I am amazed by what they produce and I count my blessings that I work in a school which allows me the freedom to teach writing the way I believe it should be taught—the way I think, Donald Graves hopes it would be taught as well.

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