

Overwhelmed? Here's One Suggestion to Relieve Some of the Workload

Future teachers of English have a great deal of work to do in preparation for any lesson in the sense that they need to be reading the novels they are teaching, constructing their lessons, creating activities that their students will be interested in, and managing the incredible workload that they seem to inflict on themselves. Thankfully, not every teacher in a school district has this kind of paper load, but most English teachers do and can quickly become buried under the work. One way to help both teachers and students is to use a workshop technique where teachers assign less writing and students help each other learn.

The biggest problem English teachers face is that there is not enough time for them to respond or read the papers very thoughtfully. I know this is not always the case, but I have learned about teachers who allow each paper they grade to have only about five minutes of their time. How can any teacher possibly read and make helpful, concerned responses to their students in just five minutes of time? James D. Williams would probably argue that teachers are unable to do this and therefore “have only two choices when deciding on a method. They can assign little writing but try to provide very effective written comments, or they can assign much writing but make few, if any, written comments. Most teachers opt for the former choice. The rationale for this choice is that comments are an effective pedagogical tool. In theory, the teacher uses them to engage in a kind of discussion with writers, pointing to those things done well, those things done not so well, then offering suggestions and advice not only on how to fix the weak parts of the current paper but also on how to improve the next one.” (267-268)

Williams is getting to the heart of what a writing workshop technique, like the one I experienced in a college course, does for students. In the writing workshop course I took, the process of writing was the emphasis of the course rather than the amount of writing. I found this course to be beneficial in helping me discover my own writing styles and learning how to revise my work, which leads me to believe it would be very beneficial for high school students to experience as well. Most writers know that writing is hard work and is never truly done because there are always revisions to be made, either because the writer's opinions have changed or because the piece would be better if something particular was changed. However, high school students are not taught to think of writing as a process because the finished product is what the teacher always grades.

The idea of a writing workshop places its emphasis on the process of writing rather than the amount of writing by grading the changes that are made over the course of the semester to each student's writing. The writing workshop is very good at getting students to focus their attention on what their writing is telling their reader and how to construct writing so that the reader will have a better understanding of what the writer is trying to say in their writing. It allows a space for discovery and learning through responding to each other's writing, which relieves some of the teacher's paper load.

Wanting a better insight about what the writing workshop specifically accomplishes and how it accomplishes those things, I went to talk to Will Banks, my college writing course

instructor. He told me that the idea of having a writing workshop within his classroom came from a number of sources, but the main source was called the Iowa Writer's Workshop. It was an idea to have writers work together to help each other revise their work in a group environment set up for that purpose. Will also mentions that much of the idea behind having a writing workshop is based on four main theories about writing: 1) writing is a social act, 2) the act of writing is a learning process, 3) there is value to revision, and 4) placing our core beliefs against the beliefs of others is a learning process. I will discuss each of these theories in turn as I share my reflections from my course with Will and how I believe each of these theories would work in a high school classroom.

First, writing is a social act. Writing is seen as a form of communication because it transmits ideas from the writer to the readers. This is important to the writing workshop because the writing workshop offers a writer's work to readers for responses. Through the kind of sharing that occurs within a writing workshop, writers can evaluate what kinds of effects their writing has on their readers and better analyze whether or not the received effects are what the author was trying to achieve. Will created his writing workshop to be a community of writers commenting on each other's work, particularly by fostering a feeling of connection to each other and through the comments he used on our early pieces of writing. He began by having us comment on each other's writing in small groups, which helped to foster trusting connectivity within the classroom. Before long, we were all thrown into one big group commenting on everyone else's work. However, between the small group workshop and the big group workshop, Will collected our drafts and commented on them, which provided a really great model for us to use when responding to each other's writing. Modeling responses for your own students helps them know what good responses should look like, which will help them further each other's knowledge through response. Through Will's responses, we were able to see that he did not tell us what to write or what to change, but inquired about what we were hoping to accomplish if he did not already know and told us what he did and did not understand in our writing. The whole process then became focused on clarifying understanding and learning what we were and were not accomplishing in our writing. He turned out to be more of a beacon than an actual signpost telling us where to go with our writing.

Along with the theory of writing being a social act is a question about responding to students in a productive way so that we model good responses for our students. There is no doubt that students who have never had to respond to their peers' writing before are going to need some guidance as to how best to respond. However, many of us have not had enough experience responding to others to model responses for our students. Therefore, some information about responding to students effectively seems to be an appropriate topic to discuss in relation to the writing workshop.

Current research is beginning to analyze the students' roles within the response process by asking students about the written responses they have received. Interestingly enough, Peggy O'Neill seems to believe that the teacher rather than the actual response makes all the difference in how responses will be taken by students because in her research she found that when asked about written responses "students' first impulse [is] to answer about how his teacher came across in person." (41) It is fairly obvious from my own experiences and the information presented by O'Neill that the connection with the teacher is the most important component to productive responses. O'Neill talks about the two examples she studied and how the students respected and admired the fact that the teachers make suggestions yet seem "to let the student know that he is free to address the teacher's concerns in his own way;" contribute their own writing to the

classroom; and are acknowledged “as expert readers and writing authorities” but still perceived as more on the students’ level. (42, 44, 45)

My writing class experience has been exactly what O’Neill discusses; Will may have used some directive comments on my papers, but never made me feel like I had to take his advice. Specifically, when I had a conference with Will about one of my papers, I felt too close to the issue to look at it objectively and decide on a direction, so I asked his advice. I did not feel as though I had to take his advice, but felt like taking a chance and seeing where the draft took me because I could always decide the draft was a flop and start over with the previous draft. The draft was significantly better for me though and pointed me in a completely new direction. O’Neill talks about how some of the comments on these students’ papers appear directive, but that the students feel free to choose what they change. This is exactly what Will did for me. He gave me specific, directive ways that I could change my piece, but he created a space for his students to experiment, fail to accomplish what they wanted, and start over again. So I knew that it was perfectly acceptable for me to take his advice, fail, and try again or perhaps write something phenomenal from my experimentation with something new. That is what the process of writing and responding is all about, trust and experimentation with language. So, as teachers, we need to make sure our own students know that they may take our advice or not, that the choices are all theirs to make in their revision process, and then allow them the room and safe place to trust themselves in their experimentation with language.

Carole Beeghly Bencich, of Indiana University of Pennsylvania, also began using a responding technique within her course “Teaching and Evaluating Writing.” Bencich discusses how her “English education students had never experienced what it was like to respond nonjudgmentally; what’s more, they very seldom received that kind of response to their own writing.” (48) So Bencich set up her course to allow students plenty of practice responding to writing through responses to each other. They were to write something each week, bring it to class to exchange, and then write responses to each other. However, after the students received their responses they were expected to write comments about the responses they received.

Bencich also includes her ideas for instructing responses in her article. She claims, “My instruction in responding was brief, using three favorite prompts appropriated from a Stephen Dunning workshop years ago: ‘I notice . . . ,’ for making global observations about the writer’s impact, mood and effect; ‘I wonder . . . ,’ for asking questions about information not included in the writing; and ‘What if . . . ?’ for making suggestions regarding the form or content of the writing.” (54) I really appreciate her inclusion of this information because it gives those of us who have not had much experience with responding somewhere to begin. I was told in my workshop class to write three paragraphs in response, the first discusses what I liked or thought worked for the piece, the second discusses what I thought the writer could do better or needed to clarify, and the last discusses anything else that might have been overlooked in the other two paragraphs. I still use this format when responding, but I am becoming very interested in trying to use Stephen Dunning’s response prompts because they could be much shorter, simpler, and direct to write to high school students.

Bencich believes her experiment was a success because “these future teachers [began] to experience response that ‘dramatized the presence of a reader’ and thereby helped them to become questioning readers themselves.” (50) I believe this could be useful for high school students too because they would begin to see their audience as containing more people than just their teacher. Bencich also believes that “by creating private, nonevaluative zones for writing, a teacher gets to know students better, and they get to practice writing in a supportive context.”

(51) I think this is one of the most important points Bencich makes because most students are not going to like writing because they don't think they are good at it or because they feel it is too hard. Through a process approach that allows students to receive responses and revise, they will begin to see that writing is not easy and that it does take work, but eventually their message will become clear and they will be very proud of what they have accomplished.

The idea that students will learn more about their audience and how to make their message clear leads us to the second theory Will mentioned, the act of writing as a learning process. Through a writer offering his/her work to readers, the writer is better able to analyze their writing process. The writer is able to look at what they wrote, how that affected the reader, and whether or not the affect was the desired effect. The writing workshop helps to foster this kind of learning by giving writers the chance to comment on each other's work and to talk to other writers about why certain techniques may or may not be working. The writing workshop also offers writers the chance to help other writers create better writing through the conferring of ideas. If a particular writer is unsure about why a particular piece is not working as they would like, they are able to consult other writers who may have had similar experiences or may be able to offer them another avenue of writing to try.

I saw this sharing of ideas working in Will's writing workshop when I was given two completely opposite responses about one aspect of a particular piece I was writing. I was writing about my grandmother and my relationship to her through a closer look and exploration of her house. As I walked the readers through the different rooms of her house, they were given certain thoughts and feelings I had in relation to those rooms. One of the students in the class, whom I shall call John, thought that my description of my grandmother's bedroom was lacking something. He just felt like there was a definite difference in the way I described that room compared to all the others and that it "kills the atmosphere in [his] mind." When he brought this up in our workshop discussion of the piece, others in the workshop thought it was a really great part because it helped to show how you cannot know everything about a person and that some things will always be kept hidden from others. After hearing these two different views of one section of my piece, I had to decide which view I was going for in my piece. I hadn't even been totally conscious of how I had written that part of my piece to show a side of my grandmother that I didn't know, but as the author it was then my job to decide if that was something I wanted to convey or not and revise accordingly.

The value of revision is also an important theory behind the writing workshop because it helps us see that we are never done with our thought process on a particular issue. We are constantly revising our opinions and views of events in our everyday lives and conversations, but revision in writing seems to be neglected. I found this idea of revision to be the most important I received from the writing workshop because it helps the writer realize that they don't always have all the answers and that they are constantly learning new things, which alter their views of life. For me, I learned a great deal about relationships between people through my piece about my grandmother. In the moment when Will mentioned that he saw the section of my piece where I discuss my grandmother's bedroom as a space showing that there are things we do not know about people we love, I was able to see that there are still ideas and thoughts that we keep hidden even from those who are really close to us whether those people are our parents, siblings, cousins, or friends. It is sometimes hard for children to think that there may be more to their parents or grandparents than they have seen, but the realization of that fact eventually finds us. I just found that realization earlier because of writing workshop experience and the revision of my piece of writing as well as my views about my grandmother.

Lastly, writing allows us to place our core beliefs against the beliefs of others. In life we are facing other people everyday and must learn how to form our own beliefs instead of always incorporating everyone else's beliefs. Through writing we are able to explore our own beliefs because we have to take a deeper look at them to make them understandable to readers. We read other people's writing and decide that we either agree or disagree with them and why in a split second, but in writing we take more time to analyze our beliefs and those of other people. I had to decide that it was okay for me to not know something about my grandmother and leave the section in the paper, while John thought it would be better to just not talk about that room. He was probably thinking that it is better to not show a lack of understanding about your topic, which we have all been taught to do by looking at all the sides of an issue and coming up with logical assertions against everything that could be presented. In this case though, I concluded that the approach was not appropriate and decided that my belief was different than John's. However, I would not have been able to make that realization about whether or not I liked the idea of ambiguity on this issue if I had not been confronted with John's dislike of the ambiguity it must have presented to him.

I am confident that high school students would be able to gain as much out of a writing workshop as I did, but it would take some time getting students used to the idea behind it. High school students tend to be more strongly grouped than college students are when they are in classroom situations, which will be hard to get them away from. There will also be problems getting students to make beneficial responses to each other, but I believe that too can be solved with time. Students in the high school deserve to see writing as a social act that will help them learn about themselves, the revision process in their daily lives, and their belief systems as much as college students do. To hold off and not try to teach our students these things will just hold those back who do not enter the English major and are never taught to think this way. We can help our students by structuring our high school writing and non-writing classes in the form of writing workshops, which will help our students learn valuable lessons about themselves and their own learning processes, as well as lighten the teacher's workload.

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