

Getting Students Involved:
Ways to Promote and Incorporate Student Engagement
In the Classroom

“I teach in a literate environment. We don’t need assignments, lesson plans, lists, teacher’s manuals, or handbooks. We need only another literate person. And our talk isn’t sterile, grudging, or perfunctory. It’s filled with jokes, arguments, exchanges of bits of information, descriptions of what we hate and why. Somehow I had to get that table into my classroom and invite my students to pull up their chairs” (Atwell 32).

Most atmospheres in writing classes are not as comfortable and open as the one above. The writing classes that I have attended, including my college years are conducted in almost the same manner. The teacher describes “what type” of paper that will be written and possible topics to use, and then goes over the “proper” format to use when writing the paper. There is usually little room for creativity or choice and if there is either of these concepts (creativity and choice), it is within the context of what the teacher deems as satisfactory. As a student, the best bet is to write to the teacher’s preferences so that you know you will get a fairly decent grade. Most teachers begin to assume that since their students are earning adequate grades that they must be learning something. What most teachers fail to recognize is that the students may have written the paper in the correct format and chose an acceptable topic, but did they retain any of this knowledge and will they be able to apply it to their lifestyles in the future? As a potential teacher of writing, I hope that students will take the love and pleasure of writing with them as well as their own forms and styles of writing.

Getting students engaged in the writing process can be a fairly difficult task. In my opinion, this task is worth the effort. Allowing your students to have a say in what they wish to write and how they wish to write will make all of the difference in their writings. If you think back to when you were forced to write on a topic that you did not particularly favor, how much effort did you put into the writing itself? Every time you write a paper, story, poem, skit, article, or even a cartoon, you are the author of that piece of writing. Every piece of writing that you do has the potential to become public and influential. “I want them (the students) to develop criteria as writers, to step back and consider what is working and what needs more work in their texts, and to set realistic goals for their writing. I want them to finish pieces of writing and bring a final copy to me so that they can feel the satisfaction of completed work” (Atwell 111). If you can get your students to believe and become interested in a certain aspect of writing enough to immerse themselves into it, then why would you not do it? Most students, especially in higher education (college), not only demand but also have a need to know why they are performing specific tasks. If they do not feel that what they are doing is relevant to their life and society, then they will not only be apprehensive about performing the assignment, but they will also put much less effort into it than what they are capable of.

Contrary to what I have been discussing, I do believe that once students are engaged and immersed in writing and the process of writing that they should be challenged to write beyond and away from what they are comfortable with. If students excel in one area of writing and lack in another area of writing, the best way to get them

to try different styles is to find a way to make all writing interesting and substantial to their beliefs. If you want a student to become interested in writing, you cannot teach him/her a topic or style of writing that he/she may not prefer or excel in at the beginning. Letting students decide what style they would like to write and what topic to write on first will begin to get them engrossed in their own ideas and forms and allow them to make the choice of what they would like to do first. "I'm no longer willing to withhold suggestions and directions from my kids when I can help them solve a problem, do something they've never done before, produce stunning writing, and ultimately, become more independent of me" (Atwell 21). As teachers, we should feel motivated and excited when a student begins to reach a point where they no longer need us to guide them by the hand on educational concepts. If our students are in constant need of our approval and ideas, then what are they going to do when we are not there to give them guidance and motivation? If we find a way to get our students motivated and excited about writing that they can take with them, they will be able to continue to compose, reflect, and analyze their own work long after we are no longer in the picture. Trying and challenging students to write out of their comfort zone will involve determination, reflection, and a want to write that we hope all of our students will have. Giving them the freedom of choice and creativity will hopefully help the students want the challenge that we try to give them.

The first concept that will affect the way a student's performance, creativity, and choices either excel or diminish is the environment of the school. If a student is in constant worry about the faculty, school conditions (broken heater, leaky ceiling crowded classrooms, etc.), or the lack of involvement from the community, then there is a high chance that the grades and attitudes will weaken. Students may become withdrawn and have a lack of participation because they are not comfortable and are not motivated because of the school setting. On the other hand, if the students are welcomed by the staff, are in classrooms that are comfortable and lack physical distractions, and know that they have the support of their school and community, the learning process, creativity of the students, and the choices they make have a higher chance of proceeding much smoother and becoming more productive. "The wisest choice for educators to make is to place student structuring at the center of school life. School should be harder and more fun" (Moffett 23). Their school should challenge students, but they should also feel that they are in a place that is welcoming and as secluded as possible from the every day fears that they may have. Although I do believe that students should discuss their fears and concerns with society and education, I do not believe that they should have these anxieties when they step into a school. Most students struggle when it comes to Writing and Composition classes, if we add school problems on top of the pressure of academia and social pressures, our students will be distracted and may not be comfortable enough to allow their mind to relax and accomplish the writing that they may be capable of.

Another concept that must be addressed when trying to get students interested and involved in writing is the classroom environment that they will be writing, reflecting, creating, and making choices in. For most students, classrooms equal safety. Therefore, each student should be in a setting that is comfortable, safe, and makes them feel at ease enough to express their thoughts and feelings, show their creativity, and make their own choices, whether it is on paper or in a discussion. As said by Peter Elbow, on students in the classroom, "Language has never been a purely individual matter. It means interacting

with others. Even though writing may be provisionally prepared privately, the choice of words, the contexts of presentation, and the ranges of response all depend on the collective values and common circumstances of communities and societies. Language can change relationships, ideals, and political interests” (Elbow 143). If language and writing constitute and affect so many aspects of how the classroom is going to be shaped, then it is important to make your students feel welcome, relaxed, and ready to participate so that the stress that writing and discussion may cause can be lessened as much as possible. The pressure that students put on themselves and each other can create static in a classroom. If you incorporated a classroom setting that was rigid, inflexible, and intimidating, there is a slim chance that the teacher will get discussions and writings that are intellectual, inquisitive, or an expression of what the students are capable of because of the added pressures of the environment. If we let our students know that they are safe and encourage them to speak, reflect, and write freely, there is a greater chance that they will develop and learn more about their own writing style and will continue to work creatively and wholeheartedly.

I have found that one of the most effective ways to teach is not to teach, but to mediate and give the knowledge that you have when it is needed and wanted. Students, in the beginning especially, are going to need some type of guidance when writing, drafting, revising, or responding to the pieces of work that they are working on. Most teachers expect that students know how to write and just need guidance on the structures that go along with writing and the writing process. If teachers can find a way to use class as a workshop or as conferencing for the students instead of lecturing, taking notes, and learning correct formats, writing may not seem as intimidating and dull to students as it usually does. This means that teachers must start from scratch. Most students do not know how to act or respond to a classroom that is structured as a conference area or workshop. The creativity and choice that the teacher gives them is new and uncomfortable for most students because they do not know what to do with their new freedom. Therefore, the teacher must be able to allow time to guide the students and allow them to understand the purpose and use of these concepts. “But then I realized I was expecting my kids to confer well without giving them any help. I don’t expect them to learn math without guidance. Why should I expect conferencing to be a natural skill” (Calkins 127)? If a teacher assumes that the students know what they are doing when it comes to these two skills (conferencing and workshoping), there is a vast chance that the students will not use this time wisely and effectively and they will be more confused and uncomfortable than what they would be in a “normal” classroom setting. As a teacher, one must come into the classroom with the conception that the students do not know what workshops and conferences are and what they entail. Then, once the students are comfortable with these ideas, the new writing process including their (the students) thoughts and selections and the learning can begin.

One idea that I found very interesting was introduced to me in my Advanced Exposition class at Illinois State University. I was introduced to zines. Most people have never heard of zines and do not know exactly what they entail. A zine is known as an “underground magazine.” An underground magazine is usually developed and known throughout the younger generations. Many authors and subscribers of these zines are around the ages of twelve to eighteen. What a zine consists of is anything. For example, a girl may feel strongly about abortion issues, so she decides to make her own zine. She

could do research and write a formal paper and add pictures, statistics, and other pieces of work that she chooses to put into her zine and distribute it to whomever is interested in reading what she says. Zines can be found on the Internet, throughout neighborhoods, on college campuses, and in high schools. A student can write on whatever topic he/she wishes, in any form that he/she feels will get the point across as desired. Most zines include pictures, words cut out from newspapers and magazines, untypical displays of writing (sideways on a sheet of paper, going in a circle on the paper, etc.), color or copies, and even use of multiple languages. When I finished this class and my four zines that I was required to create, I was not only proud of the very hard work that I had put into the class, but I was also very proud of the writing that I had created. I had four collected pieces of writing that were my own topics, my way of expressing these topics, and I had finished pieces that I could make copies of and distribute to others or keep for my own viewing. The choice and creativity, comfortable environment, and lack of structured formats allowed me to express my own ideas, opinions, and writing styles without the fear of being looked down upon because I did not have a specific organization that I was required to follow.

Another great idea to get students involved in the writing process and to incorporate creativity into the classroom is a teaching method that I heard from a high school teacher that I know. This particular teacher decided to find an interesting way to get students interested in writing short stories (roughly five pages). She contacted a seventh grade teacher and a first grade teacher that she was acquainted with to discuss a project that was forming in her head. After discussing the project with the other two teachers, all of them found a way to incorporate the idea into each of the classrooms. What ended up happening was the first graders were studying the rainforest and drew a picture of their own version of the rainforest. The pictures that they drew were then sent off to the seventh grade classroom where the seventh graders were studying poetry. Each student was given a picture and not told what it was supposed to deal with and was told to write a poem about the picture. After the poems were created, they were sent to the sophomore high school classroom. The high school students were not told what to write about or what the topic of the poems were and they then had to write a short story dealing with the poem and picture they were given. When this project was finished, all of the classrooms, teachers, parents, friends, and faculty were invited to a mutual setting and the students presented their picture, poems, and short stories in groups of three to show how each form of writing coincides with the other. All of the students took this project very seriously for two reasons. First of all, the students were told that they would have to present these projects once they were completed. Plus, they were also intimidated by the fact that peers would be reading and interpreting the writing and drawing that was to be done. If students are aware of their pieces of writing being made public to anyone, regardless if they have any connection to the students, they are more likely to work harder and be more involved in the piece that they are creating. Plus, each grade level was studying a different concept, but each was still allowed his/her own creativity by drawing, writing, and creating his/her own version of what he/she perceived from either the rainforest, the picture given to him/her, or the poem given to him/her. None of the students were told what each piece was about and they were given time to reflect and construct what they believed each one meant in their eyes and created their own meaning of it.

Another great idea that I have just recently found out about is role-playing. I know that most Literature classes incorporate role-playing because it is a way to get your students involved in the readings. I am interested in how we can get students involved with writing by role-playing and demonstrating. "I believed that students would learn if a classroom environment could be established in keeping with Cambourne's (1988) conditions for learning: immersion, demonstration, engagement, approximation, use, response, and feedback" (Allen 170). Having the students demonstrate or role-play the writings not only shows the emphasis of the description and word usage of the piece, but it also gives the teacher a chance to assess the effectiveness of the piece that is being interpreted. I have come up with a few ideas. First of all, the students could write plays, short stories, or poems and switch their pieces of work with other students. The teacher, taking the names of the students off of the papers and distributing the works sporadically, can make this anonymous. Some students may not be comfortable with other students knowing which piece of writing is theirs, so making the pieces anonymous will make the environment more comfortable for the classroom. Then the students can read the writings and reflect on them in journals and present their interpretation of the writing. After all, the interpretation that is presented may not be the initial response that the author wanted and may give him/her new ideas to develop without having to actually have peer responding by written responses. Not only will this give the students a chance to move around and interact, but it will also help to create a comfortable environment for the students. If the students are comfortable enough to read and perform writings by fellow students, then they are probably comfortable enough to try new and more challenging forms of writing. "This simple process made students look at descriptions, figurative language, and precise words" (Allen 69). To perform another student's piece of writing, one has to pay close attention to the detail and possible underlying meanings that are not picked up at first. Therefore, this exercise also plays in on learning how to evaluate and analyze a piece of writing. Most students do not go past grammar and spelling errors when responding to other's writings. Having them perform writings of other students will allow them to critique a piece without having to feel bad or having them bored with reading and responding every time that a writing assignment is assigned.

Writing is a difficult aspect for most students, no matter what activities are involved. As a teacher, the best we can do is give the students a comfortable environment, unique ways to express their writing, discussions on how to improve/expand on writing, and a pen and a piece of paper. If we can supply all of these concepts to our students, hopefully they will free their minds and perhaps write some of the most remarkable pieces ever. Creativity and choice are hard to come by in classroom settings, but I believe that they are essential in a writing environment. If we constantly tell our students how, what, when, and where to write, they will never grow and blossom on their own. If we show students ways and ideas on writing instead and let them take what they feel is important and mold it to fit their own needs, the writing that has the potential to be produced can be amazing. After all, the most we can do for our students each year is give them our attention, be open to all the knowledge we have, guide them when needed, and let them try out their wings. Granted, they may falter a few times when they are on their own, but eventually they will get the hang of it and soar to their own heights, with memories of us in their minds.

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