

Workshop 1: Creating a Community of Writers

Vivian Johnson's Reflections

Reading-writing connection

In a typical lesson I will direct the students back to whatever they're reading. In this case, of course, we're reading a lot of poetry in order to write it. So when we're talking about line breaks and white space, I'm going to direct them into the book of their choice. And immediately that ownership is the hook where they're going to be interested in it because they chose it in the first place, and I will ask them to look for whatever I'm discussing and then we take it from there. But it's gotten to the point that I don't even know I'm doing it. It's just a woven process.

Vivian's overall approach to teaching writing

So as it's evolved in writing workshop, typically now I will teach a particular genre, and that will take around three weeks where they're doing quick writes or they begin a draft. It may not even be a quick write but they begin a draft in writing workshop for several days in a row.

For instance, we were doing memoir. We studied the components of memoir. We looked at effective and ineffective memoirs. They, together with me, created a rubric of components that we wanted to assess ourselves on. And then we wrote every day. There was a model and then there was writing. And then there was sharing every single day. And, from that, they all had 10 to 15 memoirs. Then they chose the one they wanted to take through a publishing process, and that's the one that we crafted to the point of it being ready for assessment.

But I think it's more important for them to write without immediate assessment. I, myself, don't want to be publishing everything I write. And Linda Reif says we have to do a lot of bad writing to get some good writing and I believe it and I see it with the kids, that if I let them write, write, write, write—their good writing will come, and particularly when they have the ownership of what is to be graded. And as long as it lines up with the components of whatever we've said is good and they've agreed to that, then it doesn't matter to me which draft they take.

Creating a safe community

I think the most important thing, the first thing, is to un-intimidate the process, where, many of the kids who come to me, even though some of them are vet students, don't come with the sense of themselves as writers. Even if they like to read, they may be dubious about their abilities or insecure about sharing, because it's such a tender time, adolescence. And it's such an exposure of oneself to share writing. So we have to have a safe learning community, and without that, they will not write for me.

Every day for the first several weeks of school, they write and there's—I pay them to write in that they put it in their reader's-writer's notebook as homework. We work at fluency, at quick writing, at talking about suppressing the censor and letting your pencil move and learning to just write without a lot of thought but, at the same time, to try to be as specific as they can. So we practice, you know, the writing practice where you do it every day and it becomes less and less intimidating.

The homework, itself, I use a reader's-writer's notebook concept similar to what Linda Rief does, where they turn in five pages of writing a week. It's a weekly homework assignment. They read four hours at home at night and document that. They respond about, to their reading. They collect vocabulary words. They do a page of nature journaling, that's from another person but it's kind of compiled in this one assignment. And then they have three pages of their own writing each week, or two pages, depending on the time of year, sometimes it's three and sometimes it's two.

The writing notebook, part of the reader's-writer's notebook, is very open-ended. Some of them sketch. Some of them write lyrics from songs they love. Some of them write emails or notes or they collect quotes, all kinds of things. But some of their original writing needs to be in there every week. So again, I'm trying to put them on the hunt for language, make them scavengers of language and make them alert to the beauty of it, the rhythm, the music of it. So we talk a lot about that—what works for you or what resonates for you or what struck a chord in you and why.