

Workshop 4: Teaching Persuasive Writing

Jenny Beasley's Reflections

Writing for authentic purposes

The emphasis on writing in the state of Kentucky is, in my opinion, pretty unique from talking to other teachers in other states, and especially coming from the state that I come from, which I won't mention. But in the state that I came from, where I was trained as a teacher, the writing emphasis really isn't there. And kids do a lot of worksheets and reports and that kind of thing. And when I came to Kentucky and started to be trained at Eastern Kentucky University and also by the state department and representatives of the state department, I realized that the state of Kentucky very much emphasizes authentic writing.

So what they do, what the state of Kentucky does and the teachers here do, is really emphasize with the kids: This is something that is real and you are writing something for a real audience, and you're supporting yourself, and this is something that could actually change somebody's life or change your life. And that's the emphasis that I've always understood since I came here, is that you teach kids to write, to be empowered by writing, and for real reasons and real people.

Moving from personal writing to community exploration

We started out small with writing personal pieces and thinking pretty much about ourselves, and we've grown from there. From there, we wrote proposals that had to do with our school, and the students wrote proposals asking for certain things to be done in the school. And from there, we grew a little bit into the city of Somerset where we live and talked about the different communities within the city of Somerset—our families, our classroom, our sports teams, our churches, our youth groups. And they're writing editorials right now having to do with an opinion or a position that they have about that community.

And so, I feel like they're really getting a sense of how they can change their own community through writing, have an effect on people around them through writing, based simply on the fact that they are experts in what they do. That's the role that they play. And they have something to say because of that role.

Description of the editorial unit

We started out just brainstorming together some things that you could write about after we talked about what an editorial is. And they wrote in a writer's notebook where it's just whatever comes to mind. And they—it's a writing-to-learn activity in which they could take one thing that they felt strongly about in one of their communities and think about the role that they play, and just write, write, write, as, for several minutes, everything that came to mind. And what happens in that writing-to-learn activity is, while they're writing, they think of things that they didn't even know were in the back of their heads and it always surprises them. It usually takes about three-quarters of the year before they start to realize that they really do. When they start to write, things come out that they didn't know would.

And so we start with a writer's notebook. And from there, we share our ideas as a class about what could we write about. And always students get ideas from other students. That's the best thing. And from there we go to planning the editorial and actually writing it and doing research for it.

The importance of prewriting

Prewriting activities could be, in my opinion, the most important step, because if they pick something that they are not passionate about, no matter what they're writing, they won't do a good job, they can't. And so we start out with the brainstorming, the classroom brainstorming. And once they do pick a topic, and it usually takes a good two weeks at least for them to finally pick a topic or a focused purpose that they really believe in. Once we get to that point then we go into some organizational things. They actually do the writing task formula where they identify their role and their audience and what it is they want to say, their focused purpose.

From there, they analyze their audience. They think about, what is it that my audience needs to know and wants to know and in this case, an editorial, is why would they disagree with me? And from there we move on to look at different ways that they could support themselves. And while we're all doing this at the same time together, every time we stop and they write, they're writing from their own point of view and on their own paper. So it's the same in class, but it's different once they start to do it individually. And we look at a lot of models, many, many models.

Using models

I'm very fortunate where I teach that we have an hour and a half block for reading and writing. So I get to have the students for those, for that 90 minutes. And we do have time to read and write. And so it's very easy. When we're writing editorials, we're reading editorials every day and we're looking at the ways that authors support themselves. We're looking at introductions, conclusions, how an author really hones in on one specific audience. And it's, it's just a piece of cake. And then I keep those models available to them while they're writing and they can go back and look at them again.

Using textbooks to teach grammar

With the editorials, for example, we're about to talk about how to use quotation marks correctly. They've picked out a question or a statement that someone said and they know that that's going to be a quote. But by sixth grade, some of them still are struggling with how to correctly use quotation marks. We'll have to pull out our textbook, and we'll have to do just some practice with that. And I see nothing wrong with that. You know, while we're supposed to emphasize really working as—on authentic pieces and writing authentically—you have to be able to follow the rules as well, just like with anything else, in order to effectively communicate with somebody, so we have to practice from the textbook.

Planning instruction

Middle school students can't sit still very long and listen to a teacher. So it's pretty important that I have mini-lessons and have them do something and go back to teaching them something and then go back to them trying it out. And in terms of planning them, it's just a matter of being flexible, in my opinion, because things never go—never go—like I think they will. And so what we do is, we just work together kind of as one animal and figure it out as we go. But, in organizing them, I like to have 10 to 15 minutes maybe of teaching, and then they do something, and then back to teaching, etc.