

Workshop 2: Making Writing Meaningful

Allen Teng's Reflections

Tapping into students' interests

I think as a teacher you're trying to tap into something that's a part of them. I mean, so much of the way they've used school, especially at this age, is that, you know, school is something you get through. But if you're able to tap into their own interests, it's something they're actually excited about, writing about, or talking about, you know, I think it becomes something different. It's another way to enjoy what they already enjoy.

Is writing meaningful to students?

You know, sometimes I think it's good for me to take a step back and say, well, would I want to do this assignment? Is there an actual purpose for this assignment? Is this preparing them for something that they need to do later on in their lives, and if I can't answer that question maybe I need to do something else.

Knowing your students' interests

I think as educators, we need to let them educate us. I'm never going to be the expert on middle school interests. You know? So I need to pay attention. And the first time they walk into the classroom, pay attention to what they wear, pay attention to what's on their binder, what they talk about when they're not talking to you and when they're talking to their friends. You know, and that's why I like doing things like after-school clubs or events because I see them outside of that realm, outside of that classroom, and there is a whole different side to them.

And once you can incorporate that into the classroom then it becomes more engaging for them, I think. And just little references, if you can make a little reference in class then, you know, it can mean the world to them because, you know, sometimes as people that age, not a lot of people listen to them except for their peers. So as an adult if you can validate what they say as important and meaningful, you know, I can get all kinds of good advice and learning from my students on things they know about. So, I think, the more I can do that as a teacher the more engaged they are in what I do.

Rappers as writers

Maybe just my students in particular, but it's like a universal thing—they have Eminem on their binder, they have Eminem inside their binder, they have stickers, and they have it written all over the place.

And I think it's really interesting because he talks about writing so much. He talks about his process as a writer. He talks about throwing away drafts, that this was garbage and I needed to go somewhere else with this writing. If you really look at his lyrics and get beyond some of the controversial elements, he's a writer. And, you know, as many of my students idolize him I want them to idolize the writer. I try to tell them he may not be the best rapper in the world with his lyrics and his beats, but his writing is what makes him who he is. You know, that's what separates him is that his lyrics are pretty intelligent, that he's thinking. You know, unlike a lot of other rap songs that kind of deal with the same issues about, you know, treatment of women or about materialism, now here is a guy who's thinking about while he's writing and even when he's, you know, putting down somebody he's doing it creatively. He's using a metaphor. You know, there's literary devices in here, and you can incorporate that in your own writing, and it's more interesting because he is.

Engaging students

It takes more energy to be in line with their interests, but I think to be effective educators—my best education happened when I was actively involved in it, when I cared, when I wanted to participate. And I think that's, you know, especially with writing that, you know, teaching English there's so much richness in our literature and there's so much richness in terms of beyond, you know, the skills, which are very important.

It's also that life experience, to connect to something that's meaningful to you and, you know, to use that to solve some of the things that are going on in your life because there's so much going on in the lives of middle schoolers.

Building on what students already know

I don't think our job is an entertainer, you know; we're not the music critic. We use the music to hook them in. Like, especially with writing, I like when we're introducing metaphors or allegory or some other literary thing, you know, you're already experts. I am? Well, you are. Look at these lyrics. There's this device right here. There's this syntax they use. Why do you like this line? It's because

of the rhyme. And so that gets them into looking more specifically at the structure of the writing, you know, and gets them seeing maybe I can do that. I want to do that.