

You are what you believe.

– ANTON CHEKHOV

“I came into your class and became a writer.” Vannisa, 4th grade

When you walk into my classroom, you know that I honor students’ individuality and creativity. Because I teach all the gifted students at a given school, I may have three grade levels present at the same time. One student may be at the computer checking comments on the class blog while another is reading. Another is writing a reader response. Among painted chairs, student artwork, and shelves of books, we gather together at a central table to check in, listen to a read aloud, watch a video, or write together.

My classroom philosophy for writing instruction is based on three beliefs. 1) Each student has a unique voice. 2) Reading is the pathway to good writing. 3) Creativity is essential to learning.

Each student has a unique voice: I can identify my students by their voices. Their voices echo in my mind even after they are gone. The strongest voice is the one they find when they write. And each voice is unique.

As I became a writer myself years ago through the National Writing Project, I learned the difficult lesson of accepting my own voice. I wanted to write like Kate DiCamillo or E.B. White, but their voices are not mine. The struggle to find my own voice calmed as I entered the world of blogging. From other teacher/bloggers, I have found a safe environment to be myself and express my own reflections about teaching and writing.

I decided to bring my own blogging experience into the classroom by using Kidblog. At the beginning of the school year, we used a private blog that only my students can access. In March, their posts moved to a public site for the Slice of Life Story Challenge by The Two Writing Teachers.

I started following The Two Writing Teachers blog three years ago. Their yearly March Slice of Life Challenge incorporated a student challenge for the last two years. Teachers post their students’ blog sites for other teachers and students to access. We have connected with other classrooms around the United States. Because the site is public, family members can also read my students’ writing.

The connection with others helped my students learn the value of supporting each other in writing. I taught them the qualities of commenting: say something positive, ask a question, and encourage them to continue writing. Constructive criticism is important to the growth of a writer. Making specific comments as well as receiving

them leads students to experiment more in their writing and to improve for their readers. Through blogging, my students discover their unique voices.

When we meet after “sacred writing time,” I hand out sticky notes. I call these notes “criticycles” because they are constructive (sweet) criticism. They write a name at the top, then draw a +, ?, and ^ to symbolize favorite part, a question, and a suggestion. Because I am actively writing with my students, they make a criticycle for me, too. These sticky notes crowd the journal page giving the writer a sense of collaboration and connection with their writing. Writing becomes a shared activity.

Ralph Fletcher helped me to understand the unique voice of my boy students in his book Guy Write. Guys write differently from girls. I wanted to keep out the guns and war, but the fight was never ending, and I could not win.

Ralph Fletcher says, “What dazzles one person might bore the next. The question is: What moves you? As a writer, you need to be able to answer that question. And take note if it.” As their teacher, I had to allow my boys to write what moves them. Most of my gifted boys love playing video games, and game plots make their way into their writing. I don’t fight it anymore, and thus my boys have become more confident writers and will experiment with their own game plot creations.

Storybird is an online platform for writing to images. The images are like picture book illustrations that lead the writer to a story. My older students are frustrated by not finding the right image for what they want to write; however, the younger students will write about the given image. Different tools can lead each level of writer to find his/her voice.

When a reader becomes a writer, the writer becomes a better reader: Craft lessons are a natural part of our daily discussions. Whether we are looking at a piece of literature, a poem, or a picture book, we discuss craft. How did the author use figurative language? How did she draw a picture in your mind? Eventually, students show me their discovery of craft in their reading.

One of my students was reading *Walk Two Moons* and came to me to discuss the Longfellow poem “The Tide Rises, The Tide Falls.” She knows how I love poetry. She sought me out to talk about the different ways this poem was interpreted by the characters in the book. She realized that the main character’s reaction to the poem was based on the character’s experience. We talked about how the author used this poem to develop the theme of the book and reveal something about the character, a deep conversation for a 4th grader.

I connect my students with authors any way I can by blogging, using Twitter or Facebook, or old-fashioned letter writing. I do not have a budget for author visits, so I look for volunteers and free Skype visit give-aways. I have been surprised how many authors are willing to give their time freely to children. Sharon Creech visited

our blog and left a comment for a student. Margarita Engle sent personalized bookmarks.

In the fall, I invited a writing project friend to my class to discuss her new book, Haunted Lafayette. During her visit, my students became intrigued by the stories of mysterious occurrences close to home. The author led a writing exercise, showing two ways to write about a true story, one using facts like a reporter and the other using tone words like a storyteller. We all wrote spooky stories. Their work used rich imagery to express the spooky tone. Sharing with each other made my students feel like real authors.

We had two virtual Skype visits with authors this year. Caroline Starr Rose put my students at ease when talked about the typical life of an author. Greg Pincus shared his sense of humor, particularly appealing to my boys. Each of them spoke to my students as fellow authors giving them advice about writing.

Becoming a regular blogger, I have joined the kidlitosphere and post on Poetry Friday. My students know of my passion for poetry because I share it with them. We write poetry at least once a week and everyday during April. The connections I've made have brought in activities such as Chalk-a-bration, a monthly celebration of writing poetry in chalk led by Betsy Hubbard (a writer for The Two Writing Teachers). Each chalk poem lends itself to small forms such as haiku and cinquains. My principal liked our poems so much that she asked us to do special chalk poems for Grandparents' Day and Mother's Day. This activity gave my students a community service project for the school as well as validation for the worth of their work.

This year, I enrolled my class to vote in the March Madness Poetry Challenge at Think Kid Think website. What a rich vocabulary experience! We had to read poems and vote on our favorite, but each poem was written with a word that was unfamiliar to my young students. We began each voting session by looking up the word and discussing the meaning. The voting process became an impromptu vocabulary lesson that expanded their ideas and comprehension. Words like *hiatus* and *mellifluous* made their way into my student's writing projects.

Creativity is essential to learning: In this age of data-driven instruction, creativity is taking a back seat in most classrooms and has totally disappeared from many. When a student walks into my classroom, he/she is attracted to the art on the walls. I do not have the typical teaching posters. Student artwork covers the walls of my classroom. I still have a particleboard poster of Christian's painting of Benjamin Franklin. Christian is well into college by now. I also have Isabelle's and Lindsey's and Alexis's. My collection grows and if a student asks me about the artists, I know them. I taught them.

Sometimes even after my students move into middle school, I provide a creative, safe place for writing. One of my students from a previous year joined us for the March Slice of Life Challenge. She is not feeling the same safety and creativity in her new school, so she returned through blog posting and writing encouraging comments.

My students know that my classroom is a safe environment that welcomes creativity. They have an open space to explore and be who they are. While one is practicing a magic trick, another is making a book of her poems, and another is uploading pictures and text on Animoto to construct a video about the book he finished. My classroom is a truly differentiated learning environment.

Ever since I took a creativity class in my gifted masters program, I hang a painting of my own that defines my professional philosophy: an open door, a curious cat, a birdhouse, a distant planet, and the words "Open the door, explore the horizon, feel safe, be curious." I practice my philosophy every day. I am what I believe.