

**2015 NCTE Donald H. Graves Writing Award Reflective Essay  
by Emily Elizabeth Smith**

William Faulkner once spoke of the universal truths lacking in today's world, "...love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice." Little did he know that great teachers all around the world fulfill these truths every day. It's not always easy, but I approach each sunrise with these truths in mind. What I seek to offer students is a lens magnified from both sides of the window. A love of knowledge. A love of writing. It's no temporary love either. It's a life-long love that keeps students in school and takes them to college and beyond.

Working with an urban population in one of the fastest growing cities in America has allowed me a dark and sometimes twisted glimpse into what occurs behind the curtain of educational politics. I discovered there were worksheets upon packets upon booklets upon textbooks in place to help break the cycle of poverty. A temporary fix for a seemingly permanent problem. Instead, I began to take a new approach. When working with low-income and sometimes at-risk children, the task at hand is much more than creating inspiring lessons. Students must feel safe and accepted. Their basic human needs first have to be met. My vision for their education is an all encompassing one that reaches every need and glorifies every strength. It must first start with a cohesive community that interacts with social justice issues of today. The community I, along with my scholars, have built is a community that exists beyond walls and the digital world. The classroom is **not** a classroom. It's the Hive Society. And if the Hive Society could be defined as anything at all, I would pin it as a buzzing incubator of dreams and thoughts.

There are no textbooks or desks in this environment. There are so "Shhhh" signs donning the walls. There often times aren't even children raising their hands to share because the conversation has reached a state of fluidity. These things alone aren't why my scholars succeed.

Throughout the year, my scholars and I run a successful "public" radio station with consistent podcasts that we produce/record/edit/publish, we complete multiple rounds of literature circles for social change, we put on two full-day lecture conferences (similar to TED) in which scholars research subjects impassioned by their interests and present them to peers and honored guests, we host weekly forums on social issues from empathy to poverty in our world where everyone is invited to share their thoughts on how we can make meaningful impacts, annually we research, write, film and design stop-motion animation films about topics central to our passions, we keep a frequently-updated blog, and even help our 1st grade reading buddies connect picture books to big ideas like 'fairness' and 'equity' in our world. People often ask how I juggle all of these out-of-classroom and in-the-classroom tasks, and the only thing I can come up with are the words, "because I have to."

When I was young, my parents emphasized the power of my thoughts—whether that medium was my voice or my written words. Writing, to me, was an everyday occurrence. I wrote when I was happy, I wrote when I was sad, I wrote to my family and friends, I wrote to understand new things, I wrote to challenge myself, I wrote while I read, and I wrote to explore the world around me. Something happened between my middle and high school years and my love of writing diminished. The prompts and assigned paragraphs left my thoughts little room to flourish. So I began following the mandated formats and turned in lackluster papers to lackluster teachers and went to college to repeat the same process. It wasn't until I became a teacher that I decided I would be a writer again.

Writing in the Hive never feels like a chore but rather a treat. Children come into 5th grade with a chip on their writer's shoulder because in Texas, their 4th grade year is one giant three-paragraph essay. Their minds aren't aware of the power writing holds. Every first day of school I tell them that we're going to write and then I pause for the inevitable groans and murmurs about how horrible Ms. Smith is. I start by showing them a Prezi on 6-word memoirs, which seems more appealing to apprehensive writers. This exercise is always my favorite. I learn so much about my kids through their often times moving memoirs. Child I wrote, "Why do you have to go?" for her memoir, which led me to infer a variety of things. When we created digital versions of our memoirs, she used a military picture as a background for context. Child M also had an unusual 6-word memoir when he wrote "If I'm gone, look for me!" Through a conversation with him, I found out more about his parents' divorce and his fear of being the half-brother to both sets of his other siblings. Scholar M didn't want to be left behind and sometimes felt invisible in both families. Child A, on the other hand, chose a basketball theme and the words, "shooting is my goal to win." His process was rather quick, and while I saw more potential in him, I didn't push because I assumed he wasn't ready to dig deeper quite yet. Writing should be a time to express, explore, and examine our own thoughts and the world around us and this practice sets a tone for our writing throughout the year.

Scholar M was already a talented writer, but hesitant to take risks. He was consistent with production, but rarely revised or researched his pieces. Throughout his fifth grade year I saw his craft grow through the experiences he had with researching expository pieces, pacing his poetic structure, and integrating meaningful social justice topics into his poetry. I also noticed the growth of his writer's voice in his expository pieces. His first HiveTalk on the universe, while strong, lacked engaging presentation pieces that pulled in the audience. His second HiveTalk on Gatorade had many subtle nuances and humorous commentary that was not found in his prior talk. Scholar M's most prized writing possession this year was, by far, his expository inspired poem, 'Hands Up.' He was overwhelmingly proud of what he had written and wanted to share it with everyone in the school (which I allowed him to do). This piece was a turning point for him because he saw himself as a writer that could make social impact in the world, and truly understood the power of words. Overall, Scholar M achieved significant gains throughout the year as he was allowed to explore his craft through extended writing time, flexibility, and student choice in topic.

Scholar A, as I spoke about above, was hesitant to take any emotional risks within his writing. He saw himself as a decent student, but it soon became clear to me that he had an extraordinary talent for words. He is the epitome of a wordsmith. When coming up with names for our podcasts, conferences, and HIVExRADIO "swag" he began throwing out creative puns, alliterations, and catch phrases that immediately caught my attention. His word play was significantly advanced and he saw beyond what his peers were looking at when we brainstormed as a group. He applied for the "marketing position" within our class radio station and I appointed him as the lead marketing specialist. The work that he produced was remarkably creative, but he was also able to further his teams learning experience. The first round of HiveTalks commenced, and while his writing lacked proper sentence structure and punctuation, his transcript was full of voice. He and I sat down and worked on sentence structure and punctuation vocally so that he could feel the pauses and stops, which allowed him to quickly grasp on to where punctuation should go and run-ons should stop. The second round of HiveTalks went seamlessly for him, and when you look at his transcript, the growth he made on an independent level was insurmountable. However, while all of the above are celebrations in themselves, Scholar A eventually began to take emotional risks within his practice as is evidenced in his expository inspired poetry. Most notably, Scholar A told a heartwarming tale of a polar bear losing its home due to global warming. His line breaks were thoroughly edited to provide structure, but most importantly he captured his audience through raw emotion.

Scholar I was born to change the world, and she knew it. She just didn't know how she would do it. Over the year, Scholar I began to see herself as a leader and as a thinker. The prior year, she didn't pass the writing assessment, and the only reason I can conjure up for this result was that she felt trapped in formats. While Scholar I didn't struggle in math or reading, writing was a difficult task. On the first day of school when she completed her heartbreaking 6-word memoir about her father in the military, I feel like a little piece of her heart grew. She spent a pain staking about of time editing and revising and often sought out others in the classroom to review her edits. In her writing samples I've included one of her five drafts of her final HiveTalk (as well as extensive research) to illustrate her incessant love of detail and growth. Scholar I thrived in an environment in which she was able to move freely amongst the space to confer with others about her thoughts and ideas but rarely asked for my direct assistance. She became independent and confident in her craft, which is the ultimate goal when considering my philosophy of teaching writing.

I believe writing should not be measured in quantity, but rather in quality. The Hive Society is a sacred place in which hopes and dreams and wonderings and wild thoughts exist. My wish is, at the end of the year, those things will leave within the hearts of each of my scholars and continue to flourish as they find themselves through the lifelong act of writing.