

Voice and All It Entails

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INTRODUCTION

The “task of writing” is the phrase used by many to describe the labor of expressing one’s thoughts onto paper, a task I have always regarded as a relaxing and enjoyable endeavor. I have always found it simpler to communicate my thoughts and feelings through words, and it seems that I always have something to say about something or another.

Many years of schooling could never have prepared me well enough for the most challenging year of teaching; this was fourth grade. Throughout the halls of the few and different campuses at which I have taught, the air of distinction that surrounded the fourth grade teachers had been well earned. Was it an inner confidence, was it the number of years they had taught, or was it just simply conceitedness? By my fourth year of teaching, I had figured out the grand mystery! The fourth grade teachers were not any of the above mentioned; they were merely good teachers; they were very good teachers!

This elite group of teachers came in all sizes, shapes, ages, and ethnicities and with varying years of experience. One thing they did have in common was their confidence in what they did. What they did was *to mold lifetime writers*. How they went about their daily task was unknown to me, but whatever they did worked because most experienced successful TAKS Writing results.

As a bilingual elementary educator, I have experienced receiving students whose lack of prior knowledge in all content areas was not only apparent but also accompanied by the absence of any bilingual knowledge. Not only are bilingual teachers faced with the realization that our students have not mastered skills in their native language, but worse is knowing that these very students will be hard-pressed to learn a second language, master it, and pass standardized tests in the second language. All of this is expected within the course of one and a half school years, third and fourth.

And so I asked how do those fourth grade teachers do that? How do they manage to prepare and help students pass not only the Reading and Math TAKS but also the writing test which must be written in English? How are nine and ten year olds expected to do well when their years of experience are so limited? Ah – so that’s why the fourth grade teachers have earned and gained that special place of recognition; they’re worthy of the respect they’re given. They have achieved a level of success through their student’s advancement in writing. They have helped mold our future writers and storytellers. They have managed to achieve one of the most difficult milestones expected of every elementary student.

To most Americans writing is placed on the list of favorite items we love to procrastinate about. But through the eyes of the second language learner learning to write must be as painful as having a root canal without any anesthesia. Follow the painstaking process of writing from the second language learners to the facilitator where you will find the relentless, stressful, and pressured environment of the fourth grade writing teacher. Important – yes, extremely important.

Writing has become the big monster to face at fourth grade, but the development of the writing skills is focused on the “voice” of the writer. We might inquire – just what is voice? Voice shows the writer’s personality. The writing has a sound different from everyone else’s. It contains feelings and emotions so that it does not sound like an encyclopedia article. The reader should be able to sense the sincerity and honesty of the writer. The writer should be writing from the heart. The language should bring the topic to life for the reader. The voice should be appropriate for the topic, purpose, and audience of the paper (Steele).

The fact is that TAKS writing results are based on elaboration and the students’ ability to express voice. That is what it is all about – I would like to assist my students in developing “voice” in their writing. Do I know how to do that? Do I know how to teach students that knowing oneself leads to finding one’s voice? Through my students’ writing, I want them to learn not only that they are capable writers but also that they are capable of great honesty, hope, and reverence for life, and through their writing I might gain some insight into their world. Through use of their voice I hope that students learn that they are capable of using words to express their happiness, delight, curiosity, and wonder as well as expose their feelings of anger, frustrations, disillusion, hopelessness, and feelings of loss. By using two types of writing techniques—sensory visualization and auditory—students simultaneously face issues in their lives, connect with their cultural heritage and spirituality, and learn to find their voices and express themselves (Alexander).

We have used poetry as a means to assist our students in becoming better authors, to appeal to students through alternative ways for them to experience mastery in writing. Poetry appeals to children because of the frugality of words, and the ability to combine poetry with visual images and musical rhythm. The arts (poetry, fine art, music, dance or drama) allow students to access through the verbal and visual imagery of metaphor, the self-exploration and expression of feelings not traditionally ventured through traditional educational.

The unit I am hoping to develop will help other teachers like myself assist their students to develop voice in their writing. My goal is to suggest ideas by which teachers at all grade levels might introduce and elaborate on activities to help take a writing piece and enhance it by adding voice, depth to the piece. I would like to teach students how to express the great ideas they already have and attaching to those ideas their depth.

The importance of this unit is not solely to teach students methods by which to find their inner voice; the purpose is to teach them the importance of finding their voice in writing. Teaching students that their voice, thoughts, emotions, and feelings are priceless and taking ownership of said will help them enhance their writing style.

As educators we understand that our primary task is to teach our students that knowledge and ideas are of immense importance to their academic discipline. Language is that vehicle through which learning occurs. Through their language, students may begin the process of acquiring language that is common to a given profession or community of people. As young students they are still learning things such as good use of vocabulary and how to organize and structure ideas properly.

I propose teaching students to have a better sense of who they are writing for, helping students have a more clear understanding of their purpose for writing. I would like to teach students to become enthusiastic about their writing. Students should ask themselves questions that will help them direct their writing, such as: do these words sound like me? What do I want my readers to think or feel? Will I capture and maintain my reader’s attention? Will they want to continue to read? If students consider these important points, I am hoping that students will have a better direction of their writing. This unit will direct the students through lessons focusing on their visualization and auditory senses.

Sensory visualization is an important aspect of prewriting exercises. Visualization helps student concentrate and become more aware of their innermost feelings and senses. Music may help enhance the environment by offering a welcoming facility in which to elaborate on one's thoughts and emotions. Music exposes children to rhythm, rhyme and repetition that are used in reading and certainly in poetry. Through the use of music during the process of learning to discover poetry and voice the music is understood by all cultures. The student's use of rhythm may help them as they compose their own poetry.

By customizing others ideas and extending the concept can help modify a lesson fit for one's own students. Throughout the years my students and I have been exposed to different methods of expressing oneself with more expressive vocabulary, and I recall one example in particular that motivated my student's enthusiasm for writing poetry.

The activity included a slice of orange; the writing teacher asked the students to place the slice in their mouth and bite the slice. The students were asked to describe what they felt was going on their mouths, what it felt like to have the orange slice burst in their mouths. The students responded with an array of answers comparing the experience to a volcano, a burst of sunshine, a roaring sea, and so many other exciting emotions. That is the feeling I would like my students to feel when they think about writing. I would like to help them burst at the seams and to express their emotions into meaningful and colorful words of excitement.

The experience of eating an orange seemed fairly easy to extend, and so I experimented with the same concept of enjoying a fruit while making a connection between the senses and language. I mimicked the idea of giving the students strawberries and grapes, whichever their preference. The students were given time to discuss their selection using as many adjectives to help describe the fruit. As they ate the small fruit, I asked them to think of it being the very last fruit on earth, that they would never taste the same fruit again. The activity was taken more seriously, and the children focused on all the thoughts that came to mind. They discussed with a partner what they felt as they ate, the sounds the fruit made, the texture, the smell, and what they saw before it was placed in their mouth. They made use of metaphors and similes and exchanged ideas that they were surprised to have discovered independently.

The connection between the senses, language, and voice had never been so apparent than with the minimal use of a small package of strawberries and grapes. It is amazing what our students can do with limited materials and a great tool, their minds! Voice, aha! The students were able to express ideas and feelings through language.

UNIT BACKGROUND

Observation and opportunity are crucial factors in assessing student writing and finding out each students level. They must be offered different ways by which to express what they feel. I will suggest that different opportunities of encouragement be displayed for the students to explore the many resources and materials available to them. These resources and materials will include literature, magazines, music, and art.

The direction of the unit will focus on art, but in order to motive all students, I believe that different manipulatives must be made available. All materials will be offered as a canvas on which the students will be asked to demonstrate their works of art, the pieces. The teacher's observation of the children's interest in the select materials will help better attempt to meet the needs of the students.

The students will be introduced to the possibility of art being a foundation of writing. Throughout the writing unit, different authors, artists, and works of both will be shared with the students. I have found through my teaching experience that children of non-American

backgrounds are seldom exposed to the fine arts of either their new found country or from their native country.

The idea of including artists from the children's native countries would help the students become more interested in learning about the authors and artists. The children enjoy sharing the pride of learning about a famous writer or painter from their home country. Through this process I also believe that other areas of interests may be integrated into the unit, for example social studies and fine arts. Learning about their countries not only triggers memories but more importantly gives them a sense of pride to know that someone from their country has done well.

A technique I used as a fourth grade teacher was to begin with that which is true. If students start to write about something they know to be true, then it takes the guess work out of the equation. When we are asked to write about something that is true, then we stop and think about how the truth was developed in our eyes. Through experiencing the truth, we are able to more easily develop our thoughts.

By writing this way the piece traces the movement of the student's mind and tells the story of the thought, a simple thought of truth. It changes analysis into a narrative form, making it easier for the writer to write and the reader to follow. This is a good starting point for students, and through selected writing exercises, the student will move toward becoming more creative with their writing.

Writing a fictional story is the direction I hope to create for young writers. The use of artwork will be used as a prompt, helping the student to feel freedom to discover and invent new structures. This framework helps writers feel good about their thoughts, helping them feel that it's all okay; there is no wrong answer. Thus it makes sense to let students experiment, sometimes free writing with prompts and discovering text structures within their free writing. In particular the students will build on this style in which the students write for several minutes, looking at a photo or artwork.

Prior to the writing experience, students must have some knowledge of the subject about which they intend to write. By having the students learn about the subject through books, encyclopedias, pictures, and videos, the experience they have gained through a multitude of media will help the students feel ready to write, and the visualization process will be ready to begin.

Modeling will be crucial throughout this unit. Talking about writing ideas is necessary if we desire the students to become good writers—showing students how to talk about what they might write about and modeling how to choose the ideas they know and care about. Students may even be given opportunities to write about topics they have studied in science and social studies; they might write about events that have happened to them. Having students practice with each other may prove to be helpful.

There are many ways to teach writing, but how do we focus on voice? I continue to come back to this because this is the "why" of this unit. Let's face it, here in Texas we are faced with the burden of testing, and while it does serve as a good tool for accountability, it can and does wear down the enjoyment of teaching and learning.

Teaching students to discover the importance of their inner voice will help enhance the quality of all writers. My students experienced a successful year at fourth grade writing in 2005; we scored 91%, and the small percentage that did not pass was the group that I thought to be my most creative writers. I'm still not sure what happened. I want to feel confident about my style of teaching writing; my desire is to help develop young writer's enthusiasm for writing.

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

The unit will be presented in such a manner that the exposure to different artists will begin the process. Learning about the artists, their style, significance, motives, and feelings will in turn help the students learn about their own style as writers and artists. Opportunities to paint and express their emotions through painting are important. They should understand that their works of art are as important as the artist and that their own experiences allow them to become an artist. The teacher may include different artwork from the artists including artists with similar styles or technique, for example artists known as Surrealists, such as Orozco and Rivera, or the Abstract Expressionists.

Students should be prompted with questions such as “what do you think the artist was thinking when he/she painted this work?” What kind of day do you think the artist was experiencing? What would you be feeling if you had painted this piece? Open-ended questions are important because the students are beckoned to think for themselves. They must think outside of the fact that today is Monday, May 1st in the city of Houston... They can feel free to express what kind of feelings they are feeling and expressing the same in their pieces by helping them to peel the outer skin of the obvious and go beyond the surface. The core of things is truly where the explosion of concepts can be found.

By including different sources, such as literature, music, artwork, or photos, in the writing environment, the students can build from these materials and begin the quest to make the obvious more exciting by incorporating their own feelings and emotions.

My purpose is to help my future students find their voice, feel good about it, express it and do so within certain guidelines while willing to cross some of the more traditional guidelines and practices. I want my students to enjoy writing, and my goal is to help them arrive at an end product about which they are willing to share and feel proud. I want to excite them about their own writing, help them to feel that it's all good, that it all matters, it's all important, and we want to hear it all!

Using what works for yourself may prove to work for your students. I shared an activity related to a print to poetry. In an activity utilized in a Poetry Seminar, the artist was unknown to me. I did not choose it based on its fame; I simply chose it because I felt that the artist and I were at the same place in our lives, emotions or careers as he/she drew the piece. The poem which derived from the painted is my interpretation of our, the artist and my own, feelings and how the work made me feel.

Looking Across the Water

*Where do you look to? Who do you look for?
Your world is as vast as the open sea
Where does your imagination take you?
As you look out onto the waves
Through the distance you see vaguely the town
Which so quickly forgot you.*

*What do they wonder? What do they believe?
The hardship of life have rushed you through life and failed to
recall your identity
Don't forget me; don't you remember I was once a part of you?*

*Do you not remember that you were a young, strong
and unforgettable woman?
The world was to be conquered by women like you,
now you dwindle away forgetting that you are still
youthful, fervent and haunting.*

*~ Gina Lerma-Avila
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I was surprised at the new fame I managed to attract! Although the concept of the poem was based on emotions not familiar to my students, at least they had the illustration to help them better understand where my feelings originated.

The fact is I waited to share the illustration until I felt my students had an idea where this poem was coming from, what had brought these words together. They managed to understand the feeling of time past and the almost sadness felt when reading the poem. The ending gave the poem a happier tone, but once I shared the print with my students, they resorted to feeling gloomy. My purpose accomplished, the illustration directed their understanding of the poem. Different moods may be set through visuals or music.

CONCLUSION

The focus of this unit is to help enhance student's development of "voice." The activities have proven to be of enjoyment to my students, they have certainly become more comfortable with their writing abilities and feel they have much to say and express.

The strategies and experience expressed in this unit will hopefully direct both the teacher and students to bask in the enjoyment of writing for the mere purpose of enjoyment and practicing familiar skills while fine tuning the skills needed to prepare our students for a more structured writing foundation.

The lessons learned in preparing this unit is that it does not mean that one manner is right or wrong, simply that there are many ways to direct to the final project of correct.

My hope is that teachers will be inspired to use the simplest of ideas and create fun and manageable approaches to help teach writing and the development of voice involving the human senses, music and fine arts.

LESSON PLANS

Lesson One

The introduction of the use of sensory visualization through imagination will begin with the use of an image decided upon by each student. The background may be enhanced with the sounds of soft music to help with the visualization process. Allowing the student a few minutes to think about their next step limits their loss of concentration and will keep them better focused.

Materials

Background Music
Art paper

Objective

The direction of this activity is not necessarily finding the correct way of translating one's thoughts but helping the students to validate their own work important in and of itself. This activity will help students to build on word comprehension, and it is an activity that may be used effectively with second language learners. Building on their prior knowledge will help the

students feel more secure and confident to embark on not only increasing their vocabulary but building their word bank.

Activity One

Concentrating on an image, the students will be asked to close their eyes, breathe deeply. The teacher will then ask the students to visualize an image they might write about allowing them only 2-3 minutes to reflect. After a few minutes, the teacher will begin guiding the students, asking them specific questions about what they are visualizing for example: “You have a beautiful image in your mind now; keep concentrating on this image as you feel what you see.” The teacher will pause for about 10 seconds and then ask the students to slowly open their eyes and note 10 words describing what they have seen. The students will be given 2 minutes and the activity will continue with the same steps using the remaining 4 senses, hearing, touching, smelling and tasting. The following questions will be used: “What sound do you hear?” (hearing), “If you could reach out and touch your image, what would it feel like?” (touch), “What smells can you sense? (smell), “What does it taste like?” (taste).

The teacher will chart the information discussed with the class. Each category will list words volunteered by the students; for example *sight*, might include sunlight, colors, dew; *hearing*, music, windy, raindrops; *touch*, silk, delicate; *smell*, fresh, clean, sweet; *taste*, sour, flavorful and bursting.

After this activity, the students will be ready to begin the writing process. Reminding the students that writing poetry is not necessarily difficult. This may be done by giving an example of the many ways words may be combined into sentences or phrases, eventually forming poems. They will revisit the sensory words discussed followed by composing a poem.

Lesson Two

The students will have opportunities to read different types of poetry discussing the different elements of rhyme, metaphors, similes and other poetry elements. Through poetry the students learn to listen to words, rhythms and the music of language as well as the voices within their imaginations, hearts and souls (Diller 105). Poetry can improve reading fluency as they have fewer words and shorter lines of text to read at a time.

Materials

Student copy of Robert Frost: “The Road Not Taken” (1915)
Student Journal

Objective

The objective of this lesson is to expose the children to poetry that may invoke in them a sense of image. This poem is interpreted as an assertion of individualism, making a connection to one’s personal mind, voice.

Activity One

The students will have an opportunity to read and reflect on the poem by Robert Frost, “The Road Not Taken.” After a few minutes of reflective time, the teacher will model reading the poem aloud, placing emphasis on the emotion heard and felt by the students. Students will the partner with a classmate to discuss the meaning of the poem, to meditate on the language used. The students will repeat the poem, and each student will write a line which rhymes with the line read. As the teacher reads through each line, the student will write the line on the board as a reference for their self-generated poem. By having experienced musical inspiration in earlier activities, the students might wonder what type of music might accompany this poem and use this method in future writing tasks.

Varying the music might encourage the students to feel differently about the poem. For example, the poem may be accompanied with classical music playing in the background a slight move towards jazz as the backdrop may change the mood, and in complete contrast to the serene sounds of easy listening, the blaring of rock music will create an entirely different environment for the reader as he/she analyzes the poem.

Lesson Three

The teacher will select an artist and discuss their background and work. Demonstrating particular prints and talking about the possible origins of the artists work. Perhaps the artist background had some influence on their work and focus. The artist's history is important to the development of this lesson, since we know that life's experiences are what often drives an artist. Insightful meaning into their own lives may help the students discover that their own experiences may also be portrayed in a masterpiece.

Materials

Selected Artist and Print(s)
Student Journal
Music

Objective

The teacher will discuss the selected artist work, their background, and inspiration, and then display copies of the artist work. While observing the artist's work, the teacher might pose the following questions and ideas to the students: *Take yourself into the picture; which character or element of the piece would you be; what feelings the character you chose feeling, and how does that compare to you or how the piece is making you feel; or how do you think the other characters may differ with reference to feelings?*

Activity

The students will journal as the observer, describing what they see and feel. The students will then write additional expressions based on the piece but from the characters depicted in the print—from their point of view, their voices. The students may then peer-share their works and edit each other's work through discussion of their entries. This lesson may be integrated into other language arts activities; for example, through developing a poem or through reader's theater.

Evaluation

By giving the students tools to navigate through the process of writing, the artwork opens avenues to anchor the student's thoughts into something visual, something from their own past or imagination. The activity may be extended by asking the students to build a collage of drawings that are fueled by famous masterpieces.

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The Natural Child Project. <<http://www.thenaturalchild.com>>.

This collection of artwork offers a variety for connecting language and art. The website includes grade and age appropriate material, as well as information on the study of Art, explaining Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism, and other Art eras.

WebMuseum: Jackson Pollock. <<http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/pollock/>>.

Prints and artwork are available to teachers and students through this website.