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Helping Struggling Students Pages 70-73

Helping Writers Find Power

By valuing students' deeper messages and helping them learn from their errors, we can repair writing attitude breakdown.

Jeff Anderson

Most of the students who cross the threshold of my English classroom every August struggle with some aspect of writing or grammar. But rather than seeing these struggles as obstacles, I prefer to think of them as soft spots that I need to help students firm up. During the last 15 years, I have learned how to approach struggling writers so that they become proficient beyond their wildest imaginations, sometimes even surprising me in the process.

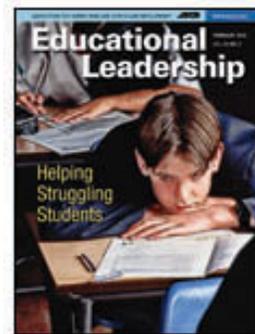
Students who struggle with writing feel frustrated and unsuccessful, always fearfully anticipating their next mistake. That's not a recipe for intrinsic motivation and effort. Because struggling writers often view writing as "a way to be wrong," they miss out on the value of using writing to express and make sense of their thoughts, experiences, and feelings. Struggling writers often believe that they have nothing of value to say (Spandel, 2005). So first I have to change that belief and allay their fears.

I have discovered three essential processes that unearth the powerful writers my students have inside them, underneath the soured attitudes and elaborate avoidance behaviors: I value what students have to say, I love their errors, and I foster their knowledge of language conventions through visual reminders of underlying grammar patterns. By the time they walk out of my room in June, most of my student writers produce creative and confident writing, share it with exuberance, and value themselves as thinkers and writers.

Valuing What Students Have to Say

When students say they have nothing to write about, they are really saying in effect, "I am not a very interesting person. My life is dull. I'm dull." (Spandel, 2005, p. 21)

It's our job to convince students that their message is *not* dull. Students' sense that they don't have anything to say is exacerbated by narrow prompts that teachers give to prepare students for standardized tests. My job is to teach students the traits of effective, appealing writing, not to prepare them for a test. If I teach students to write well, they will be able to handle a writing test with aplomb and grace. Research shows that teachers who shift from focusing on the surface features of writing in preparation for standardized tests to focusing on underlying



February 2006

writing skills actually increase their students' success on tests (Langer, 2000).

Think about it. Kindergartners often enter school announcing that they love to write—and they don't even know the alphabet or how to hold a pencil. Why then, when students reach 3rd grade and actually have the skill to write strings of sentences, do they have an attitude breakdown? I frequently hear wails of “I can't write, sir!” I've seen a frustrated 6th grader slam her pencil so hard that it bounced across her desk and rolled on the floor to stop at my feet, like a gauntlet hurled to see how I might respond.

I believe that the main culprit behind older students' distaste for writing is the well-intentioned teacher or parent who focuses on the easier-to-correct conventions of grammar and mechanics rather than on the deeper content of writing. Although educators probably all believe that they value what kids say, we must look at the subtle messages that we send when we focus primarily on surface flaws. After years of facing such well-meaning corrections, too many students begin to erase holes in the paper on their third attempt at a first draft, afraid another error will be caught and rubbed in their faces. Like this sheet of notebook paper, an eager attitude toward writing can get worn down.

The following concrete strategies ensure that students know inside and out that I value their voices, their thoughts, and their writing efforts:

- Say something good about the content of students' writing before saying anything else. Hands down, that's the most important thing. This is their soul on the page. Be sincere; you don't need to go gooey over everything they produce. But do rummage for and celebrate what they've done well.
- Push students to live by the maxim “Never a day without a line.” The sheer volume of writing that we urge students to produce—in writer's notebooks, reflections, and essays—says a lot to students about how much we value their messages.
- Become a sentence stalker, hunting down powerful snippets of text in all kinds of writing to help students hear what good writing sounds like rhythmically and syntactically (Spandel, 2004). Have students follow your lead and share their own sentence gems.
- Ask students to recopy their most successful bits of writing on transparencies, on sentence strips, on index cards, or in their journals. Have them read aloud their efforts that hit the mark, whether it's a lead, a concluding paragraph, or a whole essay. What is celebrated will be repeated.
- Help students notice what is good with their writing and what is moving in the right direction. Revel in attempts that work and in those that almost work.

Loving Their Errors

Errors ... are actually evidence of the writer's thinking, and in some cases, clear indicators of the writer's growth. (Weaver, 1996, p. 59)

English teachers need to start a revolution by turning our students' attention (and our own) to creating meaning rather than correcting errors. Handbooks and English teachers often take a

right-or-wrong stance. I'd rather my students take a thinking stance. The heart of teaching good grammar is appreciating students' errors and approximations enough to understand the reasoning behind these errors, even when that reasoning is flawed. By understanding students' thinking processes, I can better teach them grammar and mechanics.

When we look for the root of a writer's grammatical or mechanical misstep, we often find that the writer is using a pseudoconcept (Vygotsky, 1986): an overgeneralized rule, like "An apostrophe is always used to show ownership, so if I want to refer to a dog's collar, I write *it's collar*." A mistake like this reveals an error in thinking and shows me where I need to go next in my instruction.

Have you ever wondered why kids can write sentences in 3rd grade, but by 4th grade fragments appear all over their writing? It's a matter of their skills not keeping up with the complexity of their thoughts. For example, a student I'll call Francisco wrote, "When I was in 1st grade. I got sent to the principal for the second time." If I didn't look below the surface, I would just see a fragment here. But considering the thinking behind this error showed me that Francisco is ready to write complex sentences; he just put a period instead of a comma after the word *grade*. That's something to celebrate! So I told Francisco,

Look, you're writing complex sentences. You're putting two thoughts in the same sentence. You tell me you were in 1st grade and that this experience was the second time you went to the office. Not only is this a great lead, but this is also a perfect complex sentence. Can I show you a writer's secret?

I then wrote on a large sticky note, "When I was in 10th grade, I was called to the office for the first time." I asked Francisco what he noticed in my sentence that was different from his. He very humanely responded to the content of my sentence first, asking what I had done to get sent to the office, and we talked about it. That's what good writing does—it connects people.

But I wasn't about to skip over this teachable moment. I said to Francisco,

Writers have a secret they use when they want to combine two ideas like you did. Instead of putting a period after "When I was in 10th grade," writers put a comma to show that the two ideas go together. The comma tells the reader to pause. "When I was in the 10th grade" all by itself leaves your reader hanging. It is also a fragment, or an incomplete sentence. We need to hook it up to the other part of the sentence.

I asked Francisco where he should put the comma in his sentence, and he added it in the correct spot. Then he copied the polished sentence onto a transparency. In writer's workshop, I showed the group Francisco's sentence, celebrating what he had done right, and directed students to hunt for their own sentences that might need commas.

Although I can't have a conference like this with every student every day, the fruits of one conference can be shared with the whole class. But first there are more mistakes to make, more lessons to learn from one another as we discover the power of little marks to clarify our message to the reader. If educators give the message that the goal of writing is to avoid

errors, then students could stay stuck penning simple sentences for what seems an eternity.

The Strunk and White Explosion

Flood the room with useful wall charts. (Cambourne, 1988, p. 101)

I'd be doing my students a great disservice if I never helped them improve the conventions of their writing. My English language learners and many other students still struggle with the conventions of language long after they have learned to value what they have to say and let their writing flow freely. So how do I deal with these struggles, without creating struggling writers all over again?

Over the years, I have learned what *doesn't* work: worksheets and correct-all, those error-riddled train wrecks of sentences. I have found a solution that draws on the thinking of literacy theorists (Cambourne, 1988) and neurologists (Caine & Caine, 1994; Hart, 2002) who have influenced me: using wall charts to summarize often-misused mechanical rules and patterns. My classroom looks like Strunk and White's *Elements of Style* exploded on the walls. I cover every inch of wall with charts that give pithy visual reminders about grammatical patterns. My students and I create many of these charts together by analyzing sentences from both student writing and excerpts from excellent literature. We don't merely parrot rules; we look for underlying patterns, such as the principle underlying the use of apostrophes with pronouns (see fig. 1).

Figure 1. A Student-Created Wall Chart on Using Apostrophes

| The Apostrophe | |
|--|--|
| <p><i>Possessives</i></p> <p>Use an apostrophe and an s to show ownership:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Simmy's notebook• Shana's basketball• Students' answers | <p><i>Contractions</i></p> <p>Use an apostrophe like a "squish mark" to show where a letter was squeezed out:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• I can not = I can't.• I should not = I shouldn't. |
| The Pesky Pronouns | |
| | |

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>Never use an apostrophe with a personal pronoun to show possession:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Its fur = ownership of fur by it • His chair • Her sandwich • Their CD | <p>When you use an apostrophe with a pronoun, it's a contraction—always:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It's fun = It is fun. • He's intelligent = He is intelligent. • She's gotten a scholarship = She has... • They're well behaved = They are ... |
|--|---|

These visual scaffolds highlight patterns. During discussions on writing conventions, I point to the appropriate chart and connect it to the concept at hand. I have found that even when charts are removed during testing, students look at the space where a chart once was hanging and “see” the reminders that have been imprinted on their brains.

From Avoidance to Exuberance

Getting struggling students to write is all about truly valuing what they say. We need to praise students' vivid prose, like a description of the way blood tastes like pennies in the mouth or of a brother who walks over a line of chain-link fences as if it were a staircase. It's also about shifting the study of language conventions from the mere correction of errors to a discovery attitude of seeing how words work. We can move students from avoidance back to exuberance by showing them the dazzling effects that even grammar and mechanics can have when used with precision by thinking writers.

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