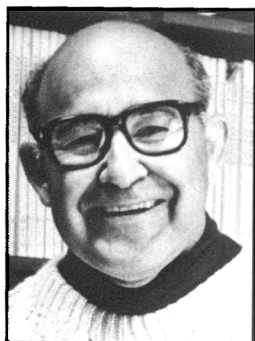


CHILDREN CAN WRITE AUTHENTICALLY IF WE HELP THEM

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My son was killed when he missed a turn in the fog and hit a tree head-on," the man seated next to me explained on our Delta flight to Atlanta, Georgia.

"That's terrible," I replied. The sizeable man sat immobile and open-faced, reading a Marine journal about the Tet Offensive in Vietnam. "So your son was killed in Georgia?"

"Nope, happened in Boothbay Harbor, Maine. Can't seem to cry now, and I couldn't cry after 'Nam. I'll pick up a van and my father in Valdosta, then drive back to Maine."

"Boothbay Harbor, Maine? Did your son ever have a teacher named Nancie Atwell?"

"Did he ever! He wasn't doing anything until he got her. She wrote this book you know, *In the Middle*, and my son has three things in it."

We continued to discuss his son, B. J. Sherman, and B. J.'s writing of "A New Beginning," (Atwell, 1987, p. 235) in which he tells about leaving his mother to live with his father. Later I called Nancie to tell her of my meeting with Mr. Sherman. After discussing B. J.'s tragic death, we, too turned to "A New Beginning." "Yes," Nancie said, "In that piece of writing, I learned that B. J. was struggling with moving from his mother's to his father's home. He couldn't write it as personal narrative; I recommended that he write it as fiction. Somehow I was able to help him realize that writing was a way to make sense of

things. Once he tied into that he just kept writing and writing; he even wrote in other classes, and sometimes that got him into trouble."

In the past, I argued that you can't ask children to write on topics they know nothing about, that children learn to write when they are well informed on a subject and have a passion for the truth of things. Further, I insisted that children need to have a sense of ownership about their writing, to feel in control of their subjects, not to write in response to topics I give them. I said all this to counter decades of teaching that required children to write about the teacher's pet topics which had little to do with engaging the child. However, I've come to understand that choice is meaningless unless we show our students how to connect choice with honest struggles and issues. Unless we as teachers demonstrate how we make this connection, children will remain prisoners of Saturday morning television with its high-speed chases and toy industry promotions. Currently, I see too many children mired in inane personal narrative accounts, characterless fiction, and poetry with little investment by the author.

Fostering the Authentic Voice

Mr. Sherman and I had a substantive conversation about his son's death and Vietnam. In the midst of our conversation, I realized that another piece of writing might fit into our discussion. I opened my briefcase, pulled out *Build a*

Literate Classroom (1991), turned to page 139, and passed him a piece by Sean, a struggling student in Linda Rief's classroom:

My Dad in the Vietnam War*

This story is really hard for me to write. It's about my Dad who was in the Vietnam War. All the terrible things that happened. How he lost really good friends. Or about one day when my dad was in a Bar. And some kid rolled alive grenade in. It lucky didnot esplode. Or how he would be walking down the street and a Religious monk who had drenched himself with gasoline, would light a match and burn himself to death just because he was protesting. This year at my Dads birthday, my sister and her friend bought my Dad a book on the Vietnam war. My Dad didn't want to talk about it because he had to many bad feelings. Someday when my Dad can talk about it. I hope he talks to me.

Mr. Sherman wept and I wept with him. Sean's text may stumble a bit, but his voice is authentic. Writing that tells the truth connects people; Mr. Sherman and I were bound together by the writing of his son and a young man far away in Durham, New Hampshire.

When teachers have authentic voices, their students have them, too. Both Linda Rief and Nancie Atwell have strong literate teaching voices, and their students write authentically. Pat McLure, first-grade teacher at Mastway School in Lee, New Hampshire, has a quiet but authentic voice. Don't mistake loud, apparently confident voices as necessarily authentic. Pat's economy of language follows careful observation of her

classroom (Newkirk and McLure, 1992). She seizes on the truth of situations and, with a single, quiet, honest question, affects an entire room of children. When her class goes through the process of hatching chicks each spring, she quietly wonders aloud, "Hmmm, I wonder why this chick weighs so much more than that one over there?" Children know she asks questions only because she doesn't know the answers to them.

Playwright Neil Simon (1992) struggles with the anatomy of writing comedy in *Broadway Bound* through two characters:

Stan keeps asking Eugene for the essential ingredients in comedy, and when Eugene can't answer, Stan says, "Conflict!" When he asks for another key ingredient, and Eugene can only come up with, "More conflict?" Stan says, "The key word is 'wants.' In every comedy, even drama, somebody has to want something and want it bad. When somebody tries to stop him—that's conflict."

Indeed the key word is "wants." B. J. *wanted* to understand the meaning of moving from his mother's home to his father's. Sean *wanted* to understand why his father couldn't speak about Vietnam. Their teachers helped them to realize that writing holds the key to understanding. B. J. and Sean were writing to satisfy their own curiosities; they kept on writing until the text satisfied their *want* in dealing with the conflict around them.

Another student, Jeff, much younger than the ones above, dealt with conflict of a different sort. He *wanted* to understand writer's block. Jeff wrote:

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* Reprinted by permission of Donald H. Graves: *Build a Literate Classroom* (Heinemann, a division of Reed Publishing (USA) Inc., Portsmouth, NH, 1991).

Four Ways of Curing Writer's Block*

I am talking about what authors fear most—writer's block. But don't worry, I have invented cures. But first, let's get to know the disease and the symptoms. If you can't think and you can't write, it's a pure case of writer's block. You feel fed up and wishing you were in Disney World. You can get writer's block with fiction or non-fiction. Let's hear the cures.

Cure #1 - Forehead pressure. This cure is quite simple. All you need is a pencil. You put the eraser part on your forehead and the point on your desk. Then push, the pressure will make you think.

Cure #2 - Brain storm. If you have an X girl friend or boy friend, you know what I'm talking about. How you hate their guts. Believe me, I know what I'm talking about; I've got one myself. Think of ways of killing them. That should give you ideas.

Cure #3 - Alf tips. If you have seen the show Alf, you know this cure. Clothes pins in the hair. Nice pressure to make you think.

Cure #4 - Food poisoning. This cure makes you write or you upchuck. This is what you would use: tuna fish and jelly sandwich. Mayonnaise on pancakes or pizza with chocolate sauce and even brownies with tartar sauce. *Caution:* Be near a bucket—side effects do happen!!!

If these cures do not work, you are hopeless as a writer. Your disease put you to the end of your writing career. Maybe you should go to Disney World after all.

Here, Jeff has taken the common conflict of struggling with writing and composed a spoof about the problem.

Writing to Understand

Children today boil with just as many *wants* as their older brothers and sisters. Every day, they face divorce, insult, separation, moving away, loneliness, and the craving for "things." How well I recall a fiction workshop I did in an elementary classroom in West Des Moines, Iowa, a few years ago. We were to compose fiction together as a class. As a starter, I asked students to choose three situations; then we'd vote and choose one we'd like to use. They suggested: "lost on an

island all alone," "kidnapped" (both rather typical selections), and "Mother and Father in an argument; there's going to be a divorce." The vote was unanimous: the divorce. The class orally composed one of the most sophisticated and authentic pieces about human want and conflict I have ever experienced.

Human angst isn't the only criterion for examining *want* in young children. Roger was a seven-year-old perfectionist. He had a vision for his piece and wouldn't settle for anything less. He composed a piece about constructing a puppet booth in six stages. His teacher said to me, "Don, would you please speak with Roger about publishing his piece? It is really good, but he seems to be reluctant to publish it. I sense he wants to. See what the trouble is." I approached Roger and was surprised by his answer: "Well, this may be good, but you see I haven't used the directions yet to actually build the booth. When I actually build it, I'll probably have to make some changes. It's not time yet to publish it."

As teachers, our job is to help children tap into their wants and also help them realize that writing can be a solution. Until we begin to help our children connect with themselves, the choices they make will be based on quick decisions of the moment. The best thing we can do, it seems to me, is to begin with our own literacy. Children need to hang around a teacher who is asking bigger questions of herself than she is asking of them. They take their cue for learning from the teacher's own literate life. It will be no surprise to teachers when we say children observe them constantly. When a teacher wears a new pair of earrings, parks a new used car in the school lot, or walks in with a new briefcase, within minutes the class is buzzing about the changes in her life.

"Today I'm writing about our old family dog. She is sick right now and I'm wondering what we'll do if she gets any sicker," the teacher announces to her second-grade class. "First, I'll show in my writing how she walks because that's what I see that reminds me how old and sick she is. I'm writing this because I need to think about her. Writing to show how she walks is hard for me." The children hear their teacher's struggle to tell the truth in her writing. They also learn something about how a writer approaches the subject. In this case, the teacher is writing about the dog for herself; this is the real issue she needs to understand. If the piece is written only for the benefit of the children, it will be hard to tell the truth, to find out what she really wants to learn.

A teacher who shows what she is trying to learn through writing isn't afraid to ask children what they are trying to learn through their own writing. "What do you *want* to say? Why do you think it is important to say that? What will you be working on to make this a better piece of writing?" Truth seekers have a way of helping others to get at the truth; they question children just as they question themselves.

The teacher's questions invite risk taking. As a writer herself, she knows when a child takes a risk. She knows that a *want* piece will contain emotion, and that emotion usually contains some degree of risk. Children sense that the teacher who writes provides a much wider safety net to support the risk taking that goes with exploration. "My teacher has been there," a child senses.

Knowing Your Own Literacy

If you haven't found that writing is a means to learn anew about the exciting world we live in, then finding the time is especially difficult. I find that writing

ten minutes a day, showing the details of the world I live in, makes a big difference in the quality of both my writing and living. (See *Discover Your Own Literacy* 1989). Writing and asking questions of what you see can set a whole new tone of literacy for you and your children.

Our children live in a world so invasive they can scarcely see and feel beyond the stimulus of the moment. Stimuli caress them, then slap them in the face. There is a world of people who calculate how to make children want what they sell. Most of their selling is deceptive, like that of Stromboli in *Pinocchio*. We and the children are told what we want in the plastic, commercial

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world that advertisers call real, and then are subtly cultivated until we are convinced that we have made our own decisions. We lose touch with the land and ourselves. We hunger for touch and weep in the boredom of our wants.

Virtually all children in our classrooms *want* to understand the complicated world in which they live. Some of the pieces they write resemble noisy arcades in which they mindlessly punch out words to fill a page. Indeed, they are exercising the choices we've given them. Like B. J. and Sean, they need to meet teachers who ask tough questions of themselves and then show their children how to reach beyond Saturday morning cartoons.

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