The Language Arts Classroom in the Nuclear Age

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The Language Arts Classroom in the Nuclear Age

The unleashed power of the atom has changed everything save our mode of thinking, and thus we drift toward unparalleled catastrophe.

Albert Einstein

Knowing is terrifying
Not knowing is terrifying
But not knowing is hopeless
And knowing may save us.

9th grade student

We have developed the capacity to make all living things extinct within a matter of minutes. The advent of the nuclear arms race has eliminated the possibility of future winners in a war. We can no longer afford to resolve our conflicts with violence. Is it possible to acquire Einstein's mode of thinking which will enable our planet to survive? How can language arts teachers help students feel enough hope in the future to merit the hard work necessary to read and write effectively?

Barbara Ruben

Leaders in language arts educational reform are currently outlining teaching processes that allow for development of new modes of thinking. Peter Elbow, director of the Writing Program at State University of New York, describes in Writing with Power a variety of freeing activities that expand the potential of young people's writing far beyond the tightly closed-ended analytic essay. Through dialogue writing Elbow asks his students to write as if inside another's head, forcing students to truly understand a potential opponent's perspective. For example, students might be asked to write a possible scenario between parent and student, only in first person from the parent's perspective. Another possibility would be to write a possible scene between President Reagan and the top Soviet leader, from each side's perspective. Elbow has his students practice "prejudice writing" where the student intentionally writes a loaded essay in which all the writer's potential biases are exposed. Students practice writing in different voices for different audiences. One of the most essential lessons they learn is the art of revision. Students learn that revising and changing are necessary and critical parts of growth. Working in small response groups, students are constantly listening to each other's writing and learning how to articulate more clearly their needs as both readers and writers. As they write, they become more critical readers, readers who listen for and can examine the writer's voice and recognize the intended audience. This link between critical reading and writing can be transferred into an increased ability to critically examine diverse presentations of world affairs. Students will be better prepared to question the voice of the author, and the intended audience. Using these tools, the student can feel comfortable taking the risks involved in both examining their own perspective and the perspective of others, therefore enabling them to explore possible solutions to global problems.

University of New Hampshire's Donald Graves, a leading spokesperson for writing as a process, advocates both critical and creative thinking within the language arts classroom. Graves has conducted extensive studies of the writing process of young writers. Graves echoes the need for respect, ownership, cooperation and student's ability to take risks for the child's development as a writer and as a person. Under Graves' model students as young as six learn to revise their writing, listen and share cooperatively with each other. They are given the responsibility for selecting their own topics. Therefore the topics children write about are relevant to their lives. They are given enough class time every day to write and revise their work. The teacher confers one-on-one.

Graves echoes the need for respect, ownership, and cooperation.
playing the guitar, flying combat mission in the Orient, residing in Italy, listening to revivalist preachers in rural Georgia as a boy on Sunday mornings. In particular, I remember him reminiscing about a friend of his during the Second World War, a pilot by the name of Donald Armstrong, whose plane crashed on some island in the Philippines. Then he read to us the poem he had written in memory of his old friend, his smooth voice sounding every bit as firm then as Miss Johnson’s as he imagined his old friend doing cartwheels and headstands just moments before he was beheaded by his captors. I felt as if I were the only other person in the library that afternoon, convinced Mr. Dickey was speaking directly to me as he read his poems. At times confused, as other times thoroughly lost, I struggled to comprehend the meaning of his words, diligently trying to pay close attention to every detail as he had urged.

Even now, several years later, I can still picture him standing at the back of our small high school library reading his poetry, convinced as much as I was at the time that it was the most rewarding lesson I received in school. I recognized for the first time the importance of concentration. Mr. Dickey persuaded me that a person should not rush through each day as if he were forever late for an appointment but should take the trouble, now and again, to consider what it is he is passing along the way. All too often I seemed to be observing each day through the window of a speeding train, scarcely able to comprehend more than a couple of things I was passing, but after that afternoon I realized I must pause long enough to fix a focused eye on the ordinary little details that before I barely knew existed. I resolved to myself to make the effort to look at the clouds, to taste the rain, to listen to the wind in the trees. Such base details seemed to have eluded me up to then, making me think of myself as a fugitive racing away from whatever appeared in my path.

I wondered to myself, as I listened to Mr. Dickey that afternoon, if he had ever felt like a fugitive at times, if perhaps one of the reasons why he had become a poet was to make himself not always race away from things but to confront them and gain an understanding of something he might easily have ignored. The pen, I suspected, is in a sense an anchor, compelling those who hold it to stay in place rather than take flight with the other fugitives in the world.

T.R. Healy lives in Portland.

I wondered if he had ever felt like a fugitive.

LANGUAGE ARTS CLASSROOM, continued

with the child, actively listening to the child read his/her work. The teacher asks questions which expand and challenge the student, without focusing on mechanics, until the ideas have had a chance to be played with thoroughly. Grades are only given on some of the work, allowing the student the freedom to experiment with new forms of writing without being penalized. The emphasis is on meaning and communications. The mechanics becomes a means of allowing the meaning to be more clearly shared with others. The student has ownership for his/her work and, therefore, is highly motivated to produce a quality product. Each child is respected and validated as their best writing reaches polished form and is published to be shared with others. They have taken risks and not been ridiculed for it. Instead they worked with others to refine, edit and strengthen their power as writers.

Methods such as Grave’s foster a generation of fluent cooperative writers who have clear understanding of the creative process. We can hope they will be a generation capable of handling the complex problems of our nuclear age, capable of working cooperatively to create solutions.

There are countless ways in which language arts teachers can work to foster a new mode of thinking, a mode of thinking that can divert us from drifting towards the catastrophe Einstein warned of us 40 years ago. Elbow and Graves offer practical and immediate teaching strategies for nuclear age education in the language arts classroom. It is time to take the risks necessary to enable our students to be powerful enough as thinkers, writers and readers to take on the awesome task at hand - the search for a new mode of thinking that will bring our world out of the nuclear age, to an age where we are active participants in the creative process of peace.


Barbara Ruben teaches 5th grade at Bridlemile School, Portland.

A SMALL RESURRECTION, continued

“What do we have to do to get an ‘A’?”
“Do we really have to write that many stories?”
“Can I have a hall pass?”

Mr. X— threw the chalk into the wastebasket and walked out. Some of us could see that, soulwise, they were trying times.

The End

“Preposterously over-dramatic!” Abe exploded. “Still,” he paused, thoughtful, “it is sweet baloney. And well written.” He carefully laid the story to one side, then grinned and stretched luxuriously. The cat, out of patience, rolled off the table and stalked toward the kitchen, tail high, looking for a quieter place to sleep. A yellow harvest moon beamed soft light over the dark tree tops and into the again silent living room. Beer forgotten, Abe reached for the next story, eager to read.

Jim Adams lives in Portland.

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