Keeping It Real:
The Importance of Audience and Purpose in Elementary Writing

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Inspiration for Teaching Project

While reading our course-related texts, I repeatedly heard authors reference “authentic writing”. Since I was not entirely sure of the definition of authentic writing, and because I was equally unsure about whether or not I was engaging my fifth grade students in authentic writing activities, I was inspired to research the topic of authentic writing.

Purpose of Teaching Project

In this paper, I will define authentic writing and identify problems related to non-authentic writing instruction. I will also provide examples of authentic elementary writing assignments, as well as examples of real audiences for elementary writers. Additionally, I will discuss the benefits of engaging elementary students in authentic writing tasks. Finally, I will explain how authentic writing in elementary school is connected to students’ success in the real world.

Definition of Authentic Writing Tasks

Through my research, I have come to define “authentic writing” as any task that engages students in writing for a real audience, with a real purpose in mind. By “real audience,” I mean a real person, or group of people, who will actually read students’ writing. When I refer to a “real purpose,” I mean that students will identify their reason for writing and determine the effect that they want their writing to have upon its reader, or readers. Ultimately, authentic student writing, as I have defined it, has something to say, and it impacts its audience by saying it. As Wiggins put it, authentic writing “opens the mind or heart of a real audience—causes a fuss, achieves a feeling, starts some thinking” (Wiggins, 2009, p.30).
Problems Related to Non-Authentic Writing Instruction

When students enter my fifth grade classroom each fall, the majority of them are unenthusiastic about writing. Not surprisingly, Graham et al. (2007) identify boredom as one of the factors that decreases students’ motivation to write. Although I like to think that the majority of the writing tasks that I assign my students encourage them to write across a variety of genres and are far from boring, Graham et al. (2007) make an important point about the importance of audience in relation to student motivation in writing. For example, Graham et al. explain: “Students are regularly asked to narrate, describe, expose, and argue in written form, but these are not always enjoyable tasks, especially when there is no audience except the teacher, and writing turns out to be routine practice” (Graham et al., 2007, p.204). Although the writer’s workshop format of my writing block is designed so that students are continuously encouraged to share their written work with their classmates, Graham et al. (2007) helped me to realize that, besides their classmates and me, I always ask my students to write for the same audience. It’s no wonder my fifth graders get bored with the writing tasks that I assign them!

Levy (2008) supports Graham et al.’s (2007) argument about the importance of helping students to identify a real audience. For example, Levy (2008) reveals the sad reality that the teacher is the sole audience for 99 percent of the work that students complete in school. Of course, this has positive implications regarding the motivation of the few students who are incredibly eager to please their teachers. Unfortunately, however, “more and more students come to class with little desire to please their teachers and no vision of the role the school might play in their success” (Levy, 2008, p.77). For this reason, Levy suggests that “[t]he most effective way to engage these students in learning is to create an authentic audience, giving them a sense that someone else, (besides teachers and parents) cares about their work” (Levy, 2008,
Furthermore, Levy insists that it is imperative for students “to have a vision of a product that matters” (Levy, 2008, p.77).

Another problem with writing instruction is that teachers, who often feel an overwhelming amount of pressure to improve their students’ standardized test scores in writing, believe that they must teach to the test. For example, several third through sixth grade teachers in my elementary building spend the first month-and-a-half of school providing their students with instruction on how to respond to writing prompts that are incredibly similar to those that they will encounter when taking the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) test. Wiggins strongly opposes this type of writing instruction and calls it “sadly counterproductive” (Wiggins, 2009, p.35). Wiggins (2009) also claims that the reason such writing tasks are so unhelpful for students is because of the fact that they are assigned with no real audience or purpose in mind.

Fletcher (1993) also identifies lack of audience as a problem that plagues upper-elementary student writers. For example, Fletcher (1993) claims that lack of audience in the upper-grades kills students’ writing voice. To explain, Fletcher suggests that the “upper-grade realities of grading, book reports, grammar dittoes, writing tests, the five-paragraph essay, etc.” murder students’ voice because there seems to be little intimacy between the writer and subject, and between writer and audience (Fletcher, 1993, p.74). Again, lack of authentic writing tasks, or those that have a real audience and a real purpose in mind, seem to hinder students’ ability to write well.

Another problem related to lack of authenticity in writing instruction is that writing teachers are emphasizing the wrong skills. For example, Wiggins (2009) claims that the focus of most writing instruction is rarely to impact. “Rather, typical rubrics stress organization and
mechanics; typical prompts are academic exercises of no genuine consequence; instruction typically makes the ‘process’ formulaic rather than purposeful (Wiggins, 2009, p.29). In fact, Wiggins (2009) suggests that, rather than teaching students writing skills and the writing process, writing teachers ought to focus their efforts on helping students find something worth communicating. To further emphasize his point, Wiggins encourages teachers to consider the following questions: “How can you write to make a difference if you have nothing to say?...Why learn to write well if you have no desire to achieve any effect?” (Wiggins, 2009, p.32).

Certainly, Wiggins’ (2009) argument suggests that students should be provided with assistance selecting a topic that is meaningful to them, determining who their intended audience is, and deciding their purpose for writing.

**Examples of Authentic Elementary Writing Tasks**

Through my research, I was able to identify a number of authentic writing tasks that would be appropriate for my fifth grade students. For example, Jacobs suggests that authentic writing opportunities include, but are not limited to, activities such as contests, online publications, and writing for social interaction” (Jacobs, 2008, p.209). Jacobs’ authentic writing suggestions made me think about the fact that I very rarely encourage my students to enter contests for publication; yet, I have the perfect opportunity to do so every month. To explain, I purchase a class set of Scholastic’s *Storyworks* magazines, which are delivered to my classroom on a monthly basis. Each *Storyworks* issue contains at least one student writing contest. These contests sometimes encourage students to try writing in a specific genre that was published in the issue. Other times, the contests prompt students to respond to one of the magazine articles; thus, encouraging authentic writing and reading.
This coming school year, I am determined to put forth a concerted effort to encourage my students to enter the *Storyworks'* writing contests. In fact, I am considering making it mandatory for my fifth graders to enter at least one contest throughout the course of the school year. By doing this, I am confident that I will be able to reinforce the importance of writing for a real audience with a real purpose in mind.

My research has also inspired me to engage my fifth graders in authentic persuasive writing through the use of controversial, yet age-appropriate, issues related to current events. This idea was inspired by Kahn (2009), who suggests that students are highly motivated to write about real-world issues that involve concrete situations and real people. Kahn (2009) claims that when students are assigned the task of taking a position on a real issue and are forced to gather evidence to support their stance, they become motivated to write. Kahn explains, “Since students are attempting to convince their classmates and others who have different viewpoints, they have the sense of a real audience for their writing” (Kahn, 2009, p.16). I think it goes without saying that this type of writing assignment also provides students with the sense that their writing has a real purpose.

In much of the research that I have read regarding authentic writing activities, the overwhelming majority of the authors seem to suggest the importance of writing across the curriculum. Levy (2008) provided several examples of authentic writing projects that integrated content-area learning and resulted in genuine products for real audiences. For instance, Levy suggests that authentic writing products can include “biographies of nursing home residents, field guides to neighborhood flora and fauna, water study presentations to city councils, portraits of recent refugees from war-torn countries, geological guides to regional landforms, theme-based calendars on everything from fitness to civil rights heroes, and alternative energy reports to
school committees” (Levy, 2008 p.79). Moreover, Levy is confident that “when students work on curriculum standards in the context of producing a genuine product for an authentic audience, the result is enhanced achievement in content-area knowledge, literacy, craftsmanship, and character” (Levy, 2008, p.79). Clearly, much learning can be achieved when we engage students in authentic writing tasks.

**Examples of Real Audiences for Elementary Writers**

Duke et al. (2007), who revealed the results of a two year study on authentic literacy in second and third grade science classrooms, provided me with several wonderful ideas about how to establish real audiences for my student writers. For example, the teachers in Duke et al.’s (2007) study established purposes for writing informational and procedural scientific text for real audiences, such as personal and professional friends of the teacher, as well as for local community members. Students in this study were even able to reach audiences outside of their schools and communities by taking advantage of email and the Internet. When I considered the number of personal and professional friends that I have within my community, the possible audiences for my students seemed to expand exponentially. The same was true when I thought about the number of contacts that I have outside of my local community. Since I have lived in Mexico, Florida, and North Carolina, I have the advantage of putting my student writers in contact with distant audiences. This coming school year, one of my goals is to connect my fifth grade writers with real audiences outside of their local community.

Other distant, authentic, teacher-arranged audiences in Duke et al.’s (2007) study included visitors to the local library whose librarian requested information books on specific science topics and museum-goers whose director sought out information sheets on other
scientific topics. I love the idea of presenting my students with the scenario that someone in the community is soliciting their help to find information. Since I don’t teach science, I have thought a lot about how I might use a similar scenario in order to provide my students with a real audience for the writing assignments that they complete in social studies.

Every year, my fifth graders compose a brochure that contains information about the Thirteen English Colonies. In previous years, the audience for my students’ brochures has simply been their fellow classmates. This coming year, however, I plan to make the same writing activity authentic by informing my students that the librarian at our local library requested that they create and display their colonial brochures in order to inform primary grade students in the community about the Thirteen English Colonies. Of course, I plan to work with employees of the local library first in order to ensure that my students’ brochures will, in fact, be put on display. I am hopeful that this assignment will help my students to thoughtfully consider their audience and purpose and that it will motivate them to write well.

The teachers in Duke et al.’s (2007) study also located authentic audiences within their school communities. For instance, “[students] wrote information books on a variety of science topics for their school libraries, for ‘next year’s class,’ ‘for kindergarteners’ (who were often willing listeners), and for numerous other classes in their schools” (Duke et al., 2007, p.353). Other teachers in the same study even “arranged with colleagues to request procedures for experiments that their classes could conduct” (Duke et al., 2007, p.353). I love the idea of having classes, teachers, and even the principal “request” written information from students. I know that many of my fifth graders would be thrilled at the prospect of composing a piece of writing, no matter the genre, for another class in the building. I am also confident that such a
writing task would force my fifth graders to thoughtfully consider how they might need to adapt their writing so that it might cater to their audience and achieve the desired purpose.

Since my students write several narrative stories about their lived experiences throughout the course of the school year, I plan to have my fifth graders write a few of their narratives specifically for students in the lower grades. After my fifth graders complete their narratives, I will arrange for them to read their stories aloud to the students in another other class. After my students have presented their writing to their audience, I will initiate a class discussion about whether or not reading their stories to their intended audience achieved the desired effect. In other words, I will ask my students to determine whether or not their purpose for writing was served. Of course, I am hopeful that this discussion will encourage my students to make revisions to their work so that it is better suited to its specific audience and purpose.

Zeleman et. al (1998) also provided me with some great ideas for expanding the audience of my fifth grade writers. For example, Zeleman et al. insist that it is vital to publish students’ work and suggest “making bound books, cataloguing student work in the library, setting up displays in classrooms, in school hallways, in neighborhood stores, or even placing class anthologies in local doctors’ and dentists’ waiting rooms” (Zeleman et al., 1998, pp.62-63). In the past, I definitely have not made a grand effort to publish my students’ written work. However, I like and appreciate many of Zeleman et al.’s (1998) ideas, especially the idea of publishing written work to be viewed by patrons in the waiting rooms of local doctors’ offices, and I plan to use many of their ideas in order to expand my students’ audience during the upcoming school year.
Benefits of Engaging Students in Authentic Writing

There is much evidence to suggest that students’ motivation to write is, in fact, increased when they are provided with authentic writing tasks. For example, Calkins insists that we can “tap the human urge to write if we help students realize that their lives are worth writing about, and if we help them choose their topics, their genre, and their audience” (Calkins, 1986, p.6). This proved to be true in Duke et al.’s study, as “[many teachers] reported that students came alive when they realized they were writing to real people for real reasons” (Duke et al., 2007, p.354).

My research also suggests that students are more apt to take the time to engage in meaningful revision when they have an authentic audience and purpose in mind. For example, Boss claims: “For many students, having a real audience provides motivation to overcome challenges and invest the time to shape, revise, and improve their writing” (Boss, 2002, p.8). Along the same lines, Zeleman et al. insist: “When the topic matters to them, children work hard to express themselves well, and are willing to invest time and effort in crafting and revising their work” (Zeleman et al., 1998, p.59).

Additionally, my research reveals that the rich and diverse responses that a student’s writing evokes from an authentic audience helps writers to nurture their skills and motivates them to continue writing in order to improve their craft. For example, Zeleman et al. argue that “[t]he best language learning occurs when students attempt actual communication and then see how real listeners/readers react” (Zeleman et al., 1998, p.59). Wiggins also supports this idea with his assertion: “Every serious writer of any age—like every performing artist, athlete, doctor, or lawyer—ultimately learns more about performance from their effects because they are motivated to achieve an effect that matters” (Wiggins, 2009, p.34). In other words, if we
continue to provide students with an authentic forum for their writing, we increase the likelihood that they will be motivated to produce writing that is good enough to solicit the desired effect from their audience. And after all, isn’t sharing writing with a real audience the true test of the writer’s success? I tend to agree with Boss’ statement: “When student writers—indeed, writers of any age—are successful, their words resonate with readers” (Boss, 2002, p.9).

**Writing in the Real World**

It is no surprise that students need to learn to write well in order to become successful professionals in our nations’ competitive workforce. In fact, a survey conducted by The National Commission on Writing (2004) revealed:

“[G]ood writing is taken as a given in today’s professional work. Writing is a ‘threshold skill’ for salaried employees and promotion…individual opportunity in the United States depends critically on the ability to present one’s thoughts coherently, cogently, and persuasively on paper” (The National Commission on Writing, 2004, p.5).

In such a competitive economy in which a person’s ability to write is directly connected to his success in the workforce, it seems imperative that students be immersed in authentic writing activities. Lindblom supports this idea with her assertion that, when students write for real audiences and for real purposes, they are forced to analyze their audience, research writing styles, and revise their writing, which “is exactly the kind of work that writing outside of school requires” (Lindblom, 2004, p.4). Certainly, those students who repeatedly engage in authentic writing tasks, in other words, those who learn to write well for real audiences and purposes, will have an enormous advantage over less competent writers once they enter the workforce as professionals.
Concluding Thoughts

Engaging students in authentic writing tasks is not commonplace in our nation’s elementary schools, nor is it an easy endeavor, especially given the rigorous curricular demands and the pressure to teach to the test. However, it is incredibly important for elementary teachers to realize the need to engage students in authentic writing tasks that will help them to become better writers and prepare them for real world writing tasks. After all, “[o]utside an instructional context, literate people almost always write only if there is a reader for their writing, even (in the case of journal or personal memo writing) the reader is the writer” (Duke et al., 2007, p.352).

My research has revealed that there are a number of authentic writing activities that teachers can engage their students in at the elementary level. My research has also shown that teachers can offer their students a wide variety of audiences for their writing. Additionally, my research has proven that, when teachers provide students with a real audience and a real purpose for writing, they enhance students’ motivation to write, and they increase the likelihood that their students will become writers who believe in the importance of revising their work so that it will produce the intended effect. Moreover, my research has shown that students who are in the habit of writing for authentic audiences and real purposes will likely develop strong writing skills; thus, placing them at an advantage over their less inclined peers when they enter the professional workforce. (The results of my research are displayed in Figure 1 below). Through my research, I have discovered that the benefits of engaging students in authentic writing tasks are great. For this reason, I am incredibly motivated and determined to provide my fifth grade students with authentic writing assignments, those that have a real audience and a real purpose in mind, this coming school year.
References


