

## **Holding on Tight to All That is Common in Our Core**

Penny Kittle, *California English*, winter 2013

This weekend my students have been emailing me drafts of personal essays on consumerism, how tourists disrespect wait staff, relationships, the after life, and so many other things they think and believe. They've told stories, they've argued, and they've provided important facts and information to clarify their ideas while following a journey of thought. To prepare to write we read essays from the This I Believe project and the best editorials I have collected.

Tomorrow I will drive through new snow in this mountain town to greet them at the door. Class will start with book talks, time to read, and conferences with individual kids about their books. We'll read "A Prayer Among Friends" by John Daniel, our poem of the day, and then write freely in notebooks. We'll spend a few moments rereading and listening to our writing, revising words and tuning sentences, deleting redundancies: the messy work that tightens meaning and clarifies thought. I'll show them how I wrote this piece you are now reading—my struggle to find a starting place in my notebook, the revising of my thinking that haunted me all day and onto the ice rink during our curling match Saturday night. The disarray of my first draft, the jumble of the second, and the clarity I'm finding in a third. They may not mentor themselves to my moves as a writer, but they will see me in the struggle they are in. They'll gather in writing groups to share their drafts, solicit feedback, and then get back to independent work. Eighty minutes can disappear before any of us are ready.

There is so little time and so much to teach.

But this is also the week before the holiday break, and new snow means my skiers may choose powder over English class. There is the usual run of flu and colds keeping some home, plus three students recovering from concussions (one hockey, one skiing, one snowboarding) and band members released to practice for the holiday concert. There are students missing parents and grandparents they lost just this fall, and two girls have lost their homes (one foreclosure, one fire.) Amidst all of the turmoil of teenage life, I work to create a space where they will grow as readers and writers.

My workshop classroom represents what I believe deeply about empowering students to read and write with facility and passion. The Common Core State Standards will not change this. Standards will not change my knowledge base or how I teach from that place. Of course my students need to read texts of increasing complexity and learn to read informational texts that will open up paths of study in psychology or politics or paranormal activity. Close, complex reading has always been a goal of mine. Of course my students should write well in a variety of forms and understand how text types blend. At our core we teachers will align our instruction to move students forward, as we always have. I will hold tightly to the best ways I know how to do that.

Sometimes I think we are arguing about the wrong things—not what they are reading or the forms they're writing in—but volume, stamina, vision, pleasure, confidence, and power. I reach for engagement and the desire to express all they know, all they've lived, and all they wonder about the world. I want my students to understand a process that will work on any text they need to read or write in the future. I want

them to know the power of their words on the page and seek a connection with readers. As English teachers we will continue to trust in what we know, and seek ways to fill the gaps of what we don't. We will seek ways to inspire our students to want more literature, more poetry, and more words that dance in images on the page.

As I gather my thinking in the quiet spaces between days spent teaching, I plan for four things because I know they provide the most likely path to the challenging bar of these standards.

**One.** Students will build an individual reading life of challenge, whim, curiosity, and hunger. This reading life is different than “proficiency” and “complexity.” It is larger—it contains multitudes. It is Tolstoy and Alexie and Shakespeare and shelves of young adult literature consumed like the last deep breath you take before a dive, because it is real life to these teenagers and when books reach them, they reach for books. My students are expected to read 25 or more books independently this year and I nurture that mission through my daily work conferring with readers and matching them to books. I press them to read more.

Why put this time into independent reading? Because there must be a balance between literature we choose for students and reading they choose for themselves. This is how all readers build idiosyncratic and lasting reading lives. I listened to a writing hero of mine, Sherman Alexie, speak in Las Vegas at the NCTE conference last month. Alexie reflected on the letters he receives from teenagers who say *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* is the first book they've ever read. He told us, “This kid has been dealt such a disservice if he's never found a book before mine.” His words are painfully true. Too many high school students come to me every year having never read a book.

Challenging expectations for independent reading are also preparation for the volume of reading in college. Students need to build muscles in high school. They must read much more than the literature we assign for close reading; they need a regular reading habit. As Paul Tough noted in *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character*, “It has become clear that the United States does not so much have a problem of limited and unequal college access; it has a problem of limited and unequal college completion. Among the 34 member countries of the organization of Economic Co-operation and Development, or OECD, the U.S. still ranks a respectable eighth in college enrollment rate. But in college completion—the percentage of entering college freshmen who go on to graduate—the U.S. ranks second to last, ahead of only Italy. Not long ago, the U.S. led the world in producing college graduates; now it leads the world in producing college dropouts.” True, some students drop out of college because of the enormous cost, but others are simply not prepared well enough for the independent reading ahead of them. We can and must change that.

**Two.** My students will come to believe they are part of a club (*The Literacy Club*, Frank Smith) where people write with a sense of craft guiding them. We will practice this writing and rereading to sharpen images and ideas in our notebooks. Notebook work is not about particular prompts or poems, but rather the regular, purposeful, sustained engagement with words and ideas, crafting towards a vision you can't quite

name yet, but will find as you write. It is about perseverance. Erica Jong said, “The hardest part is believing in yourself at the notebook stage. It is like believing in dreams in the morning.” We practice believing every day in my room.

I trust in notebooks because they lead students to write freely what they didn’t know they knew—the surprise of words on the page. My students find their voices in free writing. Sam, a tenth grader, wrote last week:

*When you pull the trigger on an animal you can’t undo that bullet. Life will leave, but the body stays unchanged, still seeming alive, but not moving or blinking. Nothing. They are still as warm and lifelike as the moment before, but that leaves.*

*It is quick and clean, but the animals are so resilient they cling to the roots of life until they can no longer hold on. When the last ounce of life leaves the mind and body of the creature you feel such a connection to it, something different than a love connection, far deeper. It feels a part of you. You’ve gained knowledge of its life story. You have now written a part of the story, the end of its story. This animal is gone that fast and you realize it could be the same with you.*

You might ask, what is this writing for? I’m not sure Sam knows yet, but even if it never finds a place in formal writing, he has found words for what he knows. As Anne Lamott said, “I think this is how we are supposed to be in the world—present and in awe.”

**Three.** Students will be encouraged to take risks in form, in style, and in craft. I want students to trust their way of seeing the world and to trust that they can organize their thinking in effective ways. I want students to live at the edge of what they can do in reading and writing. I want them to see the growth they are making by collecting writing in a portfolio. Time to read and write will be a daily, predictable routine in my room so that students can live like readers and writers, making choices and gathering skills and momentum as learners.

At the center of workshop teaching is conferring. Conferences rest on listening. I must show each one that I believe all students are competent and capable. They hear this in the language I use to talk about their writing and in the way I listen to them and those they sit beside. The core of what we believe shows up in unscripted moments like conferences. We must confer with students because, as Katie Wood Ray said, “If you’re not conferring, you’re missing out on one of the great joys in teaching.”

**Four.** My students will have access to a wide range of mentors from whom they can learn about writing: professional writers, their peers in class, other student writers, and their teacher. This week we studied two essays by Leonard Pitts, Jr., and next week we’ll study the writing of George Orwell and Martin Luther King, Jr. They also read two pieces by former students of mine, one on learning the value of composting on her family’s farm and the other on the rise of gun violence in our country. I flood them with possibilities. Vision for craft comes from the study of craft.

I will share my own struggle to write a cohesive, thoughtful essay as a bridge for their process in writing. I write beside them because modeling what we are teaching is simply good practice. It is important for students to watch how writers work: to watch a teacher struggle to improve a sentence or tighten the clarity of a paragraph. They can mentor themselves to my decision making if it helps them.

I will teach from my core, from my heart this year and next. I will teach from my beliefs about learning and teenagers and what I know as a writer and reader. I will struggle to balance my idealism with pragmatism. I will listen to teachers that lead me through their own reflections: on twitter, in blog postings, and in the professional books I read and reread. Who we are and who we are with children will not change because of the Common Core State Standards.

English poet Ted Hughes said, "And the only thing people regret is that they didn't live boldly enough, didn't invest enough heart, didn't love enough." Teach boldly, my friends. Invest your heart in the students before you. We can lead students to enter the world as thoughtful, empowered, and fearless readers and writers. It is what English teachers are called to do.

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