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Professional Writing in the English Classroom: Student Writers as Problem Solvers in Literature Classrooms

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Professional Writing in the English Classroom: Student Writers as Problem Solvers in Literature Classrooms

Abstract
The article reports on the role of student writers in the U.S. to enhance the study of literature in the classroom. High school teacher Dawn Reed shares how students' professional writing served as a starting point for deeper study and advocacy of American literature. It provides an overview of Katie Greene's assessment system that creates flexibility while providing a model of evaluation which can be adapted for other professional writing experiences.

Keywords
literature, composition, high school students, creative writing, American literature

Disciplines
Educational Methods | English Language and Literature | Rhetoric and Composition

Comments
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Student Writers as Problem Solvers in Literature Classrooms

This issue of *EJ* focuses on students reading and writing for their own purposes. If you’ve read any of our previous columns, you may have already guessed that we’re excited about this idea. We believe choices—students’ choices about what to write, for whom, and in what manner—are at the heart of many great lessons about professional writing.

However, giving students the opportunity to make such choices poses some challenges for us as English language arts teachers. To facilitate this kind of decision making in a writing course, we might teach with a writing workshop approach (Atwell; Kittle) or design projects that require students to choose their own genres (Fleischer and Andrew-Vaughan). But what about writing choices in literature classrooms? What can teachers do to enable student writers as decision makers when they are responding to literature?

In this issue’s column, two teachers share powerful examples of ways professional writing can enhance literature study. Both contributors position their students as problem solvers. This is an important element of professional writing pedagogy. The problem becomes the impetus for writing; the writer is not just producing text, but is actively engaging in a means of addressing that problem. First, Dawn Reed shows how American literature can serve as a starting point for deeper study and advocacy that occurs through students’ professional writing. Dawn’s students build from course readings and discussions to learn about the power of writing as a means of change. Under her guidance, they explore, learn, and communicate about key issues—things they care about. In doing so, they learn about multiple professional genres and interact with a variety of real audiences. Dawn helps us to imagine some of the many ways in which students in a literature class might read and write for their own purposes.

Complex and engaging projects such as the one Dawn describes can create some complicated teaching dilemmas. Consider assessment and evaluation, for example. After reading Dawn’s contribution, you may wonder how one can create an effective and efficient evaluation system when each member of the class is making independent decisions about genre, audience, and purpose. Read on! Our next contributor, Katie Greene, shares details about an assignment that prompts students to use professional writing to explain how their work demonstrates their learning. Her assessment system is student-centered and nuanced in ways that create flexibility and depth while providing a model of evaluation that can be adapted for many other professional writing experiences. As Katie’s students read *Romeo and Juliet*, they complete a project of their own design. They also write a letter to their teacher that justifies and describes their project choices. In her design for this assignment, Katie has her students act and think as professionals, positioning herself and her students in ways that use writing for thinking and reflection.

Taken together, these pieces illustrate some of the vast possibilities that professional writing presents for the English language arts classroom.

This I Wish to Change: Social Awareness and Action

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This project focuses on the importance of composition for raising awareness and creating change. Students in an American literature
course have the opportunity to engage in authentic composition while writing like the authors they study and analyze. Throughout the This I Wish to Change project, students are invited to explore topics that they care about. They begin the project in stages, from broad reading to narrowing their topic to finding recent news articles on their topic. Based on this research, they decide what they can do to address the situation through their writing. With teacher and peer guidance, students identify their own rhetorical situation, which includes finding an appropriate audience. They are also given several examples of topics, projects, and possible audiences. Students are required to publish outside our classroom (while we also share our work in class) with the intent that they find an audience with a strong investment in their topic.

Students might create a brochure, website, newspaper article, podcast, video, or another type of professional writing. To raise awareness, some students developed brochures on topics relevant to teens, such as eating disorders and suicide, and distributed them in our counseling office and local doctor offices. Other students created brochures related to being environmentally friendly and distributed them at local nature centers. Another group interested in the environment worked with our student council to design T-shirts related to going green. The sales from the T-shirts went to our high school environmental club to support their work with improving our school’s efforts to decrease our environmental footprint. Other students took a grassroots approach and went door to door with recycling information.

While all of these genres do not include all of the students’ researched information, part of the process is to turn in researched materials and show their work in the process of the project. Ultimately, students synthesize which research material should be included in their final product based on their rhetorical situation.

Projects have also led to primary-source research. For instance, one group interested in raising awareness about animal cruelty interviewed local law enforcement and then developed a film on the topic and shared it in a community gathering that they arranged.

**Students found themselves naturally engaged in work that prompted an exploration of global, national, and local concerns. They also discovered a lot about these communities as they determined their audiences.**

Another student interested in film was selecting his topic while he read *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* by Ishmael Beah ( Farrar). This text inspired him, so he contacted Invisible Children, an organization that “uses film, creativity, and social action” to end the use of child soldiers in Uganda ([http://www.invisiblechildren.com](http://www.invisiblechildren.com)). Through this contact he started remixing film by blending his own material with footage from *Invisible Children*.

Students found themselves naturally engaged in work that prompted an exploration of global, national, and local concerns. They also discovered a lot about these communities as they determined their audiences. Some students found motivation and the power of voice through social networking and online publication. One student focused on education about AIDS in Africa and recorded her speech in a video, then created a Facebook page with the goal of extending her project if enough fans emerged on Facebook. Other students created films that have been played on our school channel or posted to YouTube.

Despite the popularity of social networking, many students found that they wanted to be face-to-face with their audience to be sure they were engaged. These students gave presentations and designed reading material for local organizations. One such student, concerned about women’s rights in Saudi Arabia, determined that he wanted to share his work with a student organization at our local university, and he did so through brochures and conversation with the group. Another pair of students developed a brochure on child labor and sweatshop issues, and then they were able to inform local companies and consumers by putting the brochure in their workplace and local stores.

Yet another student, concerned about equal education opportunities, researched the topic and statistics and then presented this work to a university class about equal education opportunities. She continues to read about education and social inequalities by choice (beyond any curriculum requirements), and earlier this school year her reading list expanded. She
engaged in further research and has since changed her intended college major to one that will allow her to address this concern.

Other students began with big brush strokes of changing the world and realized they could make a difference in their local community. One student focused on advocacy for women in oppressive situations. Later, she gave a related speech to Lansing Area Women’s Forum on the topic “for every bad situation comes opportunity for improvement.” Another student in our class recognized the importance of raising awareness of AP requirements as a valuable pursuit. She completed her project for class by writing a letter to our principal and guidance faculty about AP awareness, and she is continuing to work on her project. Nearly a year after completing the project for my class, she has created a film about AP courses that will air in our student announcements.

Student reactions to the This I Wish to Change project vary. Some students who appreciate traditional instructions, which inform them exactly what to do for an assignment, get a bit frustrated with my approach. After workshop time, however, most students flourish with the assignment and inform me that it is their favorite project all year. My students and I also appreciate their authentic use of the rhetorical situation and the wrestling that they do to develop real-world, social justice compositions. Moreover, the projects are amazing, beyond the scope of what I could ever imagine for each student to compose. The authenticity prompts students to embrace the challenge of addressing real-life situations for their own reading and writing purposes.

Making Writing Matter: Student Choice and Professional Writing

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My students do not like to write. At least, this is what they tell me. My students usually state this emphatically each time I assign a paper and, ironically, they say this after I observe them texting a friend or updating their online status. I usually take a moment to comment on the discrepancies between what they do and what they say, and I tell my students that they are writers and that they engage in professional writing; as they scramble to update their social network statuses, they write for their own purposes.

I know that my students are writers. Yet technology’s ever-changing landscape and the fluidity of computer-based interactions have affected how my students engage in professional writing and their identities as writers. From email exchanges to tweets, my students interact in a variety of forums that simultaneously encourage them to write for a purpose while bending the traditional rules of convention and grammar that one would expect in a professional writing piece. Through the incorporation of student choice and student-centered writing choices, I have also created classroom spaces in which my students can explore professional writing and engage in meaningful composing opportunities.

To encourage my students to interact with professional writing during our Romeo and Juliet unit, I offer my students a variety of thematic writing choices that encourage innovative responses. During our reading of this Shakespeare play, I invite students to complete a major project that taps into their individual interests. Students may propose their own projects or choose from options that range from creating a book of photography to performing an original interpretation of an important scene from the play.

Each writing assignment is positioned within a framework of national and state standards to ensure that all students are learning what is expected of them in the course. In addition, the thematic writing prompts are assessed according to a shared rubric so that all the students are accountable for mastering the same standards, but can show their mastery in different ways.

Prior to beginning their work, the students identify which project most closely aligns with their interests, and they submit letters that explain which project they chose and why (see fig. 1). The letter must be properly formatted and use a combination of appeals to ethos, pathos, and logos, the rhetorical techniques of persuasion. For example, one student wrote that she planned to paint a picture of the famous balcony scene for her project. “I would like
FIGURE 1. Romeo and Juliet Before Writing and After Writing Letter Formats

Before Writing (Letter 1)
You have the freedom to select any medium or way through which you can demonstrate an understanding of a particular scene or act. You might create a CD featuring a theme song for each scene, write a character analysis of one of the characters, or design your own project. Be sure to keep me informed of your choice and progress!

- Which project will you choose? Why?
- How will you ensure that the project is completed on time?
- What do you hope to learn from this project?
- On which scene or act will you focus?

After Writing (Letter 2)
Submit a reflection letter after you have completed the project.

- How does your project show that you understand that Romeo and Juliet is a tragedy? (How does your project demonstrate your understanding of the play’s characters, mood, and/or theme?)
- Through your project, how have you demonstrated your understanding of Shakespearean plot elements?
- How does your project show that you understand dramatic literature?

Dawn Reed is a secondary English teacher at Okemos High School in Okemos, Michigan. She earned her Masters of Arts in Rhetoric and Writing at Michigan State University in August 2008, and she is a Program Leader for Red Cedar Writing Project. Katie Greene teaches ninth-grade Literature and Composition at Milton High School in Milton, Georgia. She received her EdS in English education from Georgia State University in 2009. Her current research explores the effects of reflective practice and multicultural education in secondary language arts classrooms.

As students practice professional writing, they become more aware of persuasive language and rhetorical strategies, and of the ways in which authors may use the strategies to suit their own purposes. Once students are able to identify the strategies that authors use to communicate professionally, students can learn to become advocates of their own talents and intellectual contributions to the classroom and beyond. “I enjoyed writing the After Writing Letter,” explained one of my students during a class discussion, “because I was able to explain what I learned in my own words. That way I knew that I would receive credit for what I did know, and that you would not have to guess what I knew from a multiple-choice test.”

Works Cited