

A Whole Lotta Coloring Goin' On

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Has anyone else noticed that there's a whole lot of coloring going on in American schools? I'm not talking about primary grades. I see an alarming number of high school classrooms decorated with colored reproducible maps, hastily drawn crayon posters substituting for literary analysis and that old kindergarten favorite – the magazine photo collage. This “work” doesn't represent the efforts of slacker students. It actually satisfies teacher (and curricular) requirements.

I have a hypothesis or two to explain the explosion of primitive expression in our secondary classrooms. It is unreasonable to expect teachers with 150-200 students to read, edit and provide feedback for that many written pieces. As a result, student work does not endure a rigorous editing process and its quality suffers. The last thing an overworked teacher wants to do at night is read poor writing. Dumbed-down alternative assignments result. This vicious cycle that neither benefits students or teachers.

Writing is a skill developed through modeling, apprenticeship and practice. It also needs an audience. It is no

secret that teachers are reluctant writers. National contest prizes requiring

A writer is a person for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people.

Thomas Mann

teachers to submit a simple essay or lesson plan often go unclaimed due to teacher insecurity. Teachers uncomfortable with their own writing skills transmit that anxiety to their students. Since the process of writing results from observing and reading the efforts of others, too many students are deprived of this vital experience. Let's face it. A kid is more likely to meet an astronaut than a writer. There needs to be many more

Teaching felonies for which you may be sentenced to a lifetime of lunch duty

Making students use all 30 vocabulary words in one paragraph.

This is a horrible caricature leading to neither vocabulary development nor effective communication.

Requiring students to conjugate words unworthy of such effort.

I evaporate. They evaporate. We used to evaporate. He evaporated at four o'clock. She will evaporate tomorrow at 3 PM. You get the idea.

Counting words. One of the great lies of writing instruction is that more writing is better writing. Most professional writing is concerned with the process of communicating your ideas in fewer words.

Forcing all human expression into the five paragraph essay.

Requiring students to write their autobiography year after year.

When I mentioned to a teacher that my daughter had written an autobiography as her major writing assignment for six consecutive years, she replied, “Did they write a ten chapter autobiography last year? I do not THINK so!”

Writing is not like painting where you add. It is not what you put on the canvas that the reader sees. Writing is more like a sculpture where you remove, you eliminate in order to make the work visible. Even those pages you remove somehow remain.

Elie Wiesel

constant rapid give-and-take with the student led me to realize that you can only teach one child at a time – really teach. The quality and quantity of feedback necessary to help the student express herself to her fullest potential required that all of my attention be dedicated to her alone. Teachers are masters of classroom management. They can whip up all sorts of ways to engage kids in all kinds of ways, but make no mistake, learning to write is an intense intimate process best achieved mano-a-mano.

The insatiable demands for accountability (testing) forces teacher to emphasize rules and isolated vocabulary memorization at the expense of creative expression and voluminous writing practice. Even when schools focus on low-level mechanics, they are hopelessly out-of-step. My twelfth grader is still required to indent paragraphs and insert two spaces after each period years after the real world and APA have abandoned these protocols.

The problems associated with writing instruction are not limited to class-size, teacher ability or testing. Curricular notions of writing need to be revised in the digital age. While kids should certainly learn to express themselves in all forms and genres, we may need to replace a few cinquain assignments with procedural description; acrostics with proposals; and sacrifice a haiku or two in order to learn how to write a manual. An occasional letter to the editor would be great too. There is plenty of time for students to learn to express themselves through fiction, poetry and technical writing.

In an age when people communicate via email, teachers are forced to write grant proposals for basic classroom materials and coherent manuals are in abundant demand, adults in every profession are writing more than they ever anticipated. Schools need to prepare students for that world.

opportunities for students to interact with all sorts of writers.

I experienced an epiphany while trying to teach a sixth grader to write a poem. The

...teaching felonies continued

Teaching comma rules.

Here's a new rule. If you can't remember when to use commas, your sentence is too damn long.

Not completing the writing process.

Equal emphasis needs to be placed on each stage of the writing process. Some teachers seem to stop at invented spelling or lose focus after brainstorming.

School newspaper headlines with spelling or grammatical errors.

Displaying or publishing unedited work.

Depriving student writing with an authentic audience at every possible opportunity