

My Literary Circus: Fostering Reading and Writing in Middle School

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“A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light that flashes across his mind from within, more than the firmament of bards and sages. Yet he dismisses without notice his own thought, because it is his. (Thus), tomorrow a stranger will say with masterly good sense precisely what we have thought and felt all the time, and we shall be forced to take with shame our own opinions from another.”

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

How the Circus Began

Back in 1985 I was fortunate enough to attend a teaching conference on writing at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (UNCC). The key note speakers at the conference were Jerome Harste and Nancie Atwell, both pioneers in the teaching of writing as a process, and they changed forever the way that I teach.

Harste told a story about a youth minister who was addressing a group of kids at a youth service. “I am thinking of a small, grayish-brown animal with a big bushy tail,” the minister said, “that runs up and down trees collecting nuts for the winter. Can anyone tell me what it is?” After an uncomfortable silence in which none of the kids would risk answering even such a risk-free question, one youngster in the back raised his hand cautiously and said, “Well, ordinarily I would say it’s a squirrel, but you probably want me to say, ‘Jesus.’”

Atwell then told a story about a girl in her language arts class who had been writing and sharing stories in class about personal family issues. The girl’s mother confronted Atwell one day and told her that she was very upset about it. Atwell’s response startled me in its simplicity, “Well, why don’t you tell her to stop?”

The point of these two stories and, the most salient point of this paper (beyond my desperate need to share what I do in my classroom with someone, anyone!) is that we teachers are often reluctant to give young people freedom in their learning. We feel pressure from colleagues, administrators, parents, and even from kids, themselves, to conform to certain expectations of curriculum and behavior. The result is that kids are not even encouraged to think for themselves, let alone pushed to do it. If we don’t help them to develop an understanding of, and interest in their own thinking, they won’t have any interest in, or need for reading and writing. In the end

they will not develop fully their ability to use language.

Over the next two or three days at that conference in 1985, I heard many down-to-earth, common sense ideas about the teaching of reading and writing - and thinking. I felt as if I had been to Mecca. And for the last thirty years I have worked to implement those ideas in my classroom. In this paper I would like to tell about what I do as a teacher today to foster reading and writing in my teaching. My goal is to give kids more freedom in their thinking and writing, which in turn will lead to more engagement in their own learning, and will, hopefully, help them “to detect that gleam of light that flashes across their own minds from within.”

The Center Ring of the Circus

“The Blue Carpet Theater”

A few years ago I had an African American male in my class who struggled to pass the North Carolina End of Grade Test. At the same time, however, he could get up on a stage in my classroom and perform an honestly-hilarious, twenty-minute, stand-up comedy routine for his classmates. In other words, he had a hard time answering seventy-five multiple choice questions “about” language, but he was a young “master” when it came actually to using that language. It has been very common in my classroom over the last ten years for rappers, dancers, story-tellers, poets, jugglers, magicians, singer-song writers, and actors - middle schoolers every one - to get up on stage and perform for their classmates in my “Blue Carpet Theater.” It gives them a chance to demonstrate their language skills outside of the standardized test and in a real way.

“Yes! Blue Carpet Theater!” someone calls out as I begin to unroll a 12x12 piece of blue carpet over the cold linoleum floor of my classroom. Shortly, students will be “invited” to come and sit on the carpet in front of a small wooden stage with a reader’s chair in the middle.

“Can I read first?” A girl calls out from the third row.

“Wait until I call for volunteers, Maria,” I respond.

In order to make space for the carpet, certain selected students have to move their desks out of the way. But they do so in a precise and particular pattern to form a perimeter of desks around the carpet. This perimeter of desks becomes the balcony of the theater.

“Yes, Thomas?” I say, “thank you for raising your hand.” He is honoring one of my important rules that students always raise their hands first and then wait until they are addressed before speaking to me.

“Can I get a red chair?” he asks.

“We’re not there yet, Thomas, wait just a minute.” I respond. I have to work hard not to let my students “hustle” me, or to get ahead of me.

Students can request to sit in one of several red canvas folding chairs (obtained at a yard sale); these offer welcome relief from the stiff metal and composite desks that they are usually stuck in, as well as some incentive for their participation in the theater. Everything that goes into the set-up of the Blue Carpet Theater has to happen in a sequential and organized manner or chaos can break out among these seventh graders. I will try to remember that Thomas was first to ask for one of these preferred chairs.

“Mr. D., can I vacuum the carpet?”

“Yes, Ethan, you may. And thank you for raising your hand.”

Ethan now dons an apron and a hard hat and begins vacuuming the blue carpet, taking his time, of course, in order to drag out this wonderful opportunity to be out of his seat and at the center of everyone’s attention.

“You know, you are going to make someone a fine housewife someday,” I say.

“Okay, Ethan, that’s good; I think you got it all,” I say.

“Don’t make a career out of it, Ethan,” I add further.

“Okay, let’s have a round of applause for Ethan and his vacuum!” I conclude - in other words, “Ethan, you are becoming annoying, now sit down. He sits down.

Now I announce to the students that they may “assume legal seats.” They may sit on the blue carpet up front near the stage, toward the back in one of the folding chairs, or in the balcony of desks that surround the carpet and the stage. This seating arrangement creates the effect of tiered-seating as in a theater or stadium, and an intimacy that is significant to the success of the Blue Carpet Theater.

“Okay, guys, if I call your name, please come up on the stage and read 150 of your own words on one of these topics: ‘Practical Jokes in Which I Have Been Involved,’ ‘Boyfriends and Girlfriends in Middle School,’ or ‘Being a Spy in Your Own House.’” An important point of nuance here is that the manner in which the teacher invites students into the theater is as vital as the theater itself and can, without a doubt, make or break the activity before it even begins. I have had many sessions in which angry and disgruntled kids, like little hornets, have refused to come into the theater, remaining spitefully in their own assigned seats, willing to take a 0 for a grade rather than to read something they had written. One must be very tactful with these acutely sensitive young people in order to avoid mutiny. Tact, that part of teaching that cannot be taught nor legislated may be the most significant factor of all.

The Blue Carpet Theater is really nothing more than an opportunity for young people to read (publish) their writing to each other in the manner that language arts teachers have been doing in one way or another forever, or in the more progressive manner that Nancie Atwell describes in her book *In the Middle*. However, there is “reading a paper to classmates,” and then there is “reading a paper to classmates in the Blue Carpet Theater.” One is when a reluctant and listless student, maybe once or twice a “year,” reads a stilted essay or narrative to a classroom of yawning, authority-controlled kids, waiting only restlessly for lunch:

The Memoirs of Jesse James

I remember all those thousand of hours
that I spent in grade school watching the clock,
waiting for recess or lunch or to go home.
Waiting: for anything but school
My teachers could have easily ridden with Jesse James
for all the time they stole from me.

- Richard Brautigan (Rommel Drives on Deep into Egypt)

Reading a paper to classmates in the Blue Carpet Theater, on the other hand, is when a group of students gather comfortably on a carpet in a little theater as often as twice a “week” to read their own “unique” and “original” stories to each other, and who might even sing a song which they have made-up on their own to welcome each other to the stage:

“Blue Carpet Theater (clap, clap), welcomes you. Halloween Special!”

- Anthony Patterson (and classmates) Seventh Grader, Charlotte, NC

I will try to explain in this paper how the Blue Carpet Theater brings credibility and meaning to all the other language arts activities in which my students participate. There is, however, one more aspect of the Blue Carpet Theater that adds a little more lift to my classroom.

The Open Stage: Encouraging Future Circus Performers

About ten years ago, somehow - maybe knowing instinctively that I had to overcome my own fear of expressing myself in front of a group of people - I began writing songs and performing them on guitar in local restaurants and music venues - especially at open mic nights - around Charlotte. One of the places at which I performed on a fairly regular basis - two or three times a month for about ten years - was The Evening Muse, a music venue in the North Davidson Arts District of Charlotte (NoDa). The Muse is run by a talented and altruistic music-lover named Joe Kuhlmann. I was quite surprised when some of my original songs - stories, really, in the tradition of a Harry Chapin - brought very positive responses from audiences. That

authentic-audience experience inspired me to write more songs. A monster had been created in me! So, I thought, “Why not replicate this “open mic” concept in my classroom. That’s how I got the idea for the Blue Carpet Theater. Another talented musician I credit is John Tosco, whose work to develop community through music is well-known in and around the Charlotte-Area, as are his open-stage-type music shows, called “Tosco House Parties.”

Though many of the performances on the Open Stage in my classroom are not technically language-arts related, the kids still have to get up in front of the class and introduce themselves and their performances - a language skill. Even if that were not the case, the excitement that the performances bring to the classroom is palpable. When I announce early in the week that we will be having Blue Carpet Theater and Open Stage on Friday, the kids get really excited. Kids inspire kids to overcome their fear of performing, and of expressing themselves in general. If a kid can meet the challenge of performing on the Open Stage, then the simple reading of a piece of personal writing in the Blue Carpet Theater will seem much less daunting. And a lot of kids who secretly want to perform on the Open Stage but are reticent, see reading a piece of their writing in the Blue Carpet Theater as a safe half-step to performing, which, until now, they never had the audacity even to dream that they could do.

I, too, perform on the Open Stage. I play guitar and sing, rap, tell Halloween ghost stories - complete with lighting, sound effects, and props - read poetry, and perform a juggling show. I am contemplating a dance routine of Michael Jackson dance moves, but I have not yet become accomplished - nor brave - enough, but I hope to. As a teacher I need to experience the same things that my students do. Taking risk is the key for everyone. Over the course of the year students get many opportunities to perform; hopefully, one day, having watched and thought secretly about performing, a student may suddenly decide to take the plunge. And when the alternative is for everyone to go back to their germ-infested, metal and composite desks to do conventional language arts class work (I always have a really dull and lifeless vocabulary activity ready and waiting for them; I’m telling you, you always have to be one step ahead of them), you know that they are going to be very appreciative of anyone who will risk performing, even if the performance is - every performers greatest fear - “stupid.” This creates an atmosphere of support and encouragement in which heroes and monsters can be created. “Blue Carpet Theater (clap, clap) welcomes you, Open Stage!”

So, this is the center-ring of my literary circus - the Blue Carpet Theater and Open Stage.

Circus Side Shows

The authentic audience of the Blue Carpet Theater is the heart and center of my program, but there are several side shows (features) that feed it, and without which the experience just wouldn’t be the same. To whet my reader’s appetite, I will list here a number of the side shows of my literary circus. Later in the paper I will describe most of them in more detail.

“Bustin’ Out Books” - Seven novels are studied during the year. Each is heard on tape or

CD as well as read in class.

“Fabulous (and not-so-fabulous) Films” - all seven novels studied are accompanied by film versions of those novel. A sports-bar concept (for lack of a better description) is utilized using three video screens in the classroom to enhance the experience for the students.

“Dynamite Discussions” - innovative class discussions that don’t require the teacher to repeat over and over again, “Stop talking...I said, stop talking...I’m not going to tell you again to stop talking...Stop talking!”

“The Nightly 150’s” - Students write 150-word personal responses to literature every night (like religion).

“Reasonable Revisions” - a painless, yet effective way to get kids to collaborate in revising and editing their stories using an activity called “Red Circle Editing.” “Oh, boy! we get to go to the computer lab!”

“Not-so-Nasty Notices (of behavior)” - a system of asserting discipline that responds to kids’ behaviors objectively and attempts “cautiously” to modify those behaviors in a civil and dignified manner.

“Doherty Dollars” - a classroom economy in which students receive money to be spent in classroom auctions. Do you know how much a “duo-decillion” dollars is? My students do.

“Gorgeous (literary) Groups” - literature circles, Socratic seminars, and peer-editing groups, etc., all rolled into one, with an element of friendly competition and scorekeeping The most gorgeous groups (the ones with the most points) get to use the media center conference room or Mr. D’s office for their meetings!

“Vivid and Vivacious Visuals” - students produce artwork to demonstrate and express their understanding of literary works studied.

“Crazy Connections (to literature)” - students use an LCD projector and surround sound to present informative pieces related to novels we study. For example, a “U-Tube” piece on how a pearl forms inside an oyster with music and time lapse photography works well in bringing a little more life to our study of John Steinbeck’s *The Pearl*.

“Research Riches” - a series of research experiences threaded through the year that use novels (historical by nature) as catalysts for more learning, and that help students to learn how to document research.

Throughout this paper I will try to help the reader see how these features work complementarily to make my classroom a place where students are more often engaged in, and

excited about, reading and writing.

The Ringmaster Makes a Discovery

The side shows just listed evolved slowly. For several years after my exposure to Jerome Harste and Nancie Atwell (and others), I tried without success to get my kids really involved in reading and writing in the way that my mentors did. But all I got was tokenistic writing and “alleged” reading. It was not a “circus” at all in the sense of being fun and exciting; although it may have been a circus in the more pejorative sense - but then the word “zoo” would be more appropriate. Anyway, after years of failure, I came to a realization.

All those years, I had been doing things backwards. Generally, I had been following the somewhat traditional and conventional approach of assigning kids to read - a short story or a chapter of a novel - at home at night, and asking them to write about what they had read in school during the day - be it a “warm-up” activity, a journal entry, an essay test, or even an attempt at Nancie Atwell’s writing workshop approach. But I finally realized that the kids were not able to write at school because they were too distracted by their peers - in middle school social relationship reign supreme.

At the same time, the kids weren’t getting their reading done at home either. They would claim to have read the short story or the twenty pages of the novel, but, when I would attempt a class discussion, they would have very little to say. And after trying different remedies, I became convinced that there was really no way to hold them accountable. Here is why.

Let’s just say for example that one of my students, Tevin, who is the quarterback on the football team, has a bad day and throws an interception that ends up costing his team a big game. Now, at home afterwards, he is expected to read twenty pages of Jack London’s *Call of the Wild*. I am convinced that even if he wants to do his homework, and even if his parents encourage him and support him with all the amenities, and even if Tevin actually sits down with the book in front of him and tries to focus on the words of Jack London’s novel in his quiet and well-lit room, he will not be able concentrate on that text as the events of the big game roll through his mind. But the next day in class he is likely to say, “Yes, Mr. D., I read.” And, technically, he did.

Less-developed readers might spend a lot of time at home really trying to read, yet come away with very little comprehension, whereas a more savvy language user could ask a friend on the bus to give him a quick summary of the reading and then be able to pass a simple quiz or answer a general discussion question. But there is nothing tangible by which a teacher can hold students accountable for close and serious reading. And if the kids can’t be held accountable, they are not going to do the work.

Then, a solution came to me! The ringmaster would rearrange the circus tents. I would have my students read in school during the day, under my watchful supervision, and then write

150-word responses at home at night (Tevin may write his 150-word piece on “How It Feels to Lose the Big Game”), responses that they will be required to submit the next day. Now I could account for student’s reading and writing much more tangibly. This arrangement, simple, but which I believe to be an original idea, has become, along with the Blue Carpet Theater, one of the most significant strategies of my language arts program.

What will follow now is a detailed illustration of two side shows (mentioned earlier) built upon the Ringmaster’s Discovery:” “Bustin’ Out Books” and the “Nightly 150.”

Two More Rings in My Three-Ring Circus

“Bustin’ Out Books”

“Is everybody ready?”

“No, we’re not ready!”

“Well, what’s the hold up?” I tease.

I push the play button on my \$49 CD/tape/radio player. “Shane,” my own voice says loudly (I have personally narrated and recorded this and other novels that I teach), emanating from four speakers placed around the room so all can hear, “Chapter 5.”

“Wait!” a student says, rushing back to her seat after sharpening her pencil, “I’m not ready!”

I stop the tape, rewind it, and say, while I am waiting and have their attention, “Is it just my imagination or does Marian Starrett (a married woman) have a crush on Shane? Check it out in this chapter.”

Then I push the play button again and for the next twenty to thirty minutes pins will be heard if they drop, noisy students in the hallway will be ignored, and the students in my class will be well-absorbed in Jack Schaefer’s classic western narrative.

Each student will have a copy of the novel and thirty comprehension-type questions in front of him or her on the desk. They will follow along with the audio-tape in their texts and attempt to answer as many of the questions I have given them as they can.

“Dynamite Discussions”

At the end of the reading session I will employ one of several discussion strategies that I have innovated. These I call “Dynamite Discussions.” This one has no name as yet, but has implications of “Hold on to your hats because here we go.” With seventh graders a teacher

must really keep things moving. “Number one?” I say. without having to preface the activity because the kids already know the drill. “Lucia?”

“A horse approaching the house.” Lucia answers.

If Lucia has it right, I don’t say, “That’s right, Lucia, good job!” I simply say “Number two?” We are moving! However a little hotel clerk’s bell - “Ding” - for a correct answer, followed by a “Doherty Dollar” on one’s desk, adds to this “Dynamite Discussion.”

“I didn’t hear the answer!” Huajing, an Asian girl with pigtails, calls out.

“You didn’t raise your hand, Huajing,” I say, at which time she expresses mild exasperation - she really does want the answer. Then she raises her hand.

“Yes, Huajing?” I say now, “thank you for raising your hand.”

“I didn’t hear the answer to number one.” she says.

“Check with a classmate,” I say, “and if someone helps you, let me know who it is.”

In my classroom, once an answer has been given - not only for this activity but as a general rule, I will not repeat it. A fringe benefit of this method, aside from getting kids to listen more the first time, is that they begin to police each other’s noise-level and talking, and to work together to help each other.

Later Huajing will tell me that Kristin helped her with the answer and I will give Kristin a crisp one hundred “Doherty Dollar” bill. The class will finish this review discussion in about five or six minutes. This is long-enough for seventh graders.

Novel Studies

My school year is threaded with novels. I present several novel units, including two high-interest books: *The Outsiders* by S.E Hinton and *I am the Cheese* by Robert Cormier, both favorites of Nancie Atwell’s, and now favorites of mine. And allow me to interject here that using novels (stories) as the basis for units of study works very well in middle school because the stories serve to “connect the days” for kids who otherwise will forget what happened five minutes ago, let alone what happened yesterday in class; but who, with the help of the plot of a good story, are likely even to begin to anticipate what might happen tomorrow. Creating a context for their work in this way helps a lot. Often when a parent asks a kid, “So, what did you do in school today?” the kid will say, “Nothing,” which can be translated into, “I don’t really remember.” And when this happens, the kid is really telling the truth. Novel units can help in this regard.

To give my students the best opportunity to “get” the characters, plot, and basic ideas of these and other novels, including *The Pearl*, John Steinbeck, *The Giver*, Lois Lowery, *Shane*, Jack Schaefer, and *Call of the Wild*, Jack London, I require them to listen to these books on audio tape or CD as well as to read them. I have wired a relatively-good quality sound system in the room, which consists of four speakers (obtained, again, at yard sales) so that everyone in the room can hear the narratives clearly.

I also use different recordings, including some that I have narrated myself, so the kids can hear different voice patterns and intonations. The students read along with the audio and are encouraged to answer comprehension questions - two or three per page - as they go. Kids today can multi-task far better than we ever could! The questions serve as the basis for “Dynamite Discussions” after each chapter or section is completed. They also serve as a means of accountability; kids will receive credit for their participation in the reading. What I particularly like is that once the audio tape starts, the ringmaster (me) is free to circulate the room observing and helping kids (like Tevin) to stay on task.

“Fabulous (and not-so-fabulous) Films”

But I don’t stop with this relatively close reading of the novels. The students will also watch film versions of the books. By the way, I consider the film version of Jack Schaefer’s *Shane* (1948, Alan Ladd) to be fabulous (though dated) while I consider any film version of John Steinbeck’s *The Pearl* to be not-so-fabulous; that novel just doesn’t lend itself well to film. Interestingly, *Pale Rider* (1990, Clint Eastwood) is a fascinating remake of *Shane* from the point of a young girl (Megan) rather than the original point of view of Joey, a young boy. This provokes some interesting discussion. To make this long digression just a little bit longer, it is little-known that S.E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders* is structured suspiciously-similarly to Jack Schaefer’s *Shane*. This discovery a few years ago prompted me to begin teaching these two novels consecutively, in order to help my students to identify and understand such structure.

After having read a few chapters of a book, the students will then get to see those chapters on the multiple screens in the classroom. This helps when students are absent, or when for whatever reason they don’t grasp the story through reading. It also invites a lot of discussion and comment on why the film director might have changed the story from the text. This lends itself to the idea of author’s purpose, an important part of the seventh grade CMS curriculum that my students are supposed to “master.” Anyway, through this process of reading, hearing, discussing, writing (about), and viewing, my students have as good an opportunity as they can have to assimilate and digest what is in these novels. It also prepares them for the more in-depth activities that will come later. This digestion of plots and characters is only the beginning. Each novel is a giant circus trunk which must be opened - its contents spilled and rifled-through.

“The Nightly 150’s”

The novel studies (“Bustin’ Out Books”) closely connect to The Blue Carpet Theater in that each night I am able to pose writing assignments for my students: “In what way are you similar to, or different from Ponyboy?” or “Ponyboy doesn’t like to fight, do you?” The novels create an opportunities for my students to write and share personal experiences that may prove interesting for a bunch of kids hanging out on a piece of blue carpet.

Virtually every night of the school year my students will write 150 words in response to things that happen in the books that they read. Occasionally, the assignment will be related to some other aspect of middle school life, such as “Halloween Stories,” or “Thanksgiving Thoughts,” or maybe something about “Bullying” if a school-wide campaign happens to be underway. This nightly writing is collected in a writing folder and gives them a lot of material for reading on the Blue Carpet and for revising and editing. The kids are very proud when their writing folders (portfolios) get fatter than any writing folders they’ve ever been required to keep.

How Does the Ringmaster Manage the Quantity of Writing Generated by his Literary Circus?

My practice with grading papers has really evolved over the last ten years. I no longer feel that I have to grade every paper. I don’t even feel that I have to read every paper. I collect the students written work as often as I can, say twice a week. But they never know when it will be collected; therefore, they feel some pressure to do their writing every night. If a student generates 150 words on the given topic (they may do alternative topics if they feel the need), they will get an A. I grant these A’s in good conscience because I know from personal experience that the only way one becomes a writer is by writing. I also think something good happens when a kid gets back loads of papers with that have an ‘A’ written at the top in “red ink.” Yes, I do use “red ink,” but it’s okay because the dynamic has been changed, “the paradigm has shifted,” “the circus has come to town!”

I record as many of these as I can. Out of five writing assignments, one or two will end up in the grade book. But, again, the kids don’t know which ones will “count” so they sort of have to write them all. My hope, as well as my experience in reality is that after writing for a while - and especially in conjunction with the experience of the Blue Carpet Theater - they will stop writing for grades and start writing for more personal and intrinsic reasons and rewards.

But here is the part they hate. I post student grades in my classroom, and writing is a large percentage of that grade. If a student’s grade average is less than satisfactory because he or she hasn’t turned in assignments, I issue progress reports that must be signed by a parent. If I don’t get the progress reports back, signed, I follow up with a phone call. I hate to be this way - coercive - but I have learned that no matter how exciting a classroom is, and classrooms should still be exciting, kids are not going to work if they can get out of it. Unfortunately for them, in my class, they cannot get out of it. The cage they are in may be very big, but it is none-the-less, a cage.

So, I breeze through a stack of seventy-five (75) papers, glancing at the words to determine

roughly whether there are 150 of them or not, and putting an appropriate grade on top. I can probably finish this stack, including the recording, in ten to fifteen minutes. “But you haven’t read the papers!” I can hear a concerned teacher saying right now. Well, actually, I do look at them long enough to catch a glimpse of what the student is writing about. I may spend a little longer if I am interested in what a particular student is doing so I do get to know them as writers. Consider this: I have probably seen everything that a middle schooler might write at least a hundred times.

Furthermore, when my students sit in the reader’s chair in the Blue Carpet Theater, I will hear their stories again, and when one day a week they go to the computer lab to revise previously written pieces, I will get a third chance. Finally, I get a fourth chance when they re-submit these revised and edited papers.

“Reasonable Revisions”

Nancie Atwell convinced me that correcting every mistake in a student’s paper is not necessary, nor effective. Suggesting two or three simple conventions to a student is more reasonable - and humane - and will suffice; however, one must remember that no method of providing feedback for young writers will be effective if those young writers are not writing with enthusiasm and sincerity on a daily basis. The engagement that I have spoken about throughout this paper is still the key.

Through the “Nightly 150’s” I have been able to get my students to generate and share lots of writing. By the end of the first quarter in my class, my students have writing folders with fifty (50) or sixty (60) pages of their own “freely-written” work. When this first began to happen a few years ago, I was very excited - until I realized that now I had the menacing task of getting my students to revisit all of that freely-written work and to bring to it a little more structure and convention.

Have you ever asked a student to do a second draft of a paper? Here’s what you get:

“Do I have to?”

“Why?”

“It’s already typed.”

“I couldn’t find any mistakes.”

“I had it saved so I just printed out a second copy.”

Here’s how I get my students to do a second draft.

Red Circle Editing

“Okay, guys, today we are going to the computer lab!”

“Yea!” Jonathan is heard to say, not because he’s going to get to revise and edit his work but because he’s going to get out of the classroom for thirty minutes, and with a little bit of luck, he may even get to play a video game on a computer in the computer lab.

“Here is what I expect you to accomplish today,” I say, turning on an overhead projector and turning out the lights in my classroom (Yes, I still use this old piece of single-function technology in my classroom, but I am working to transfer all my transparencies to the computer and the LCD screen. It just hasn’t happened yet!).

On the screen is the following:

INSTRUCTIONS FOR REVISE/EDIT #3

1. You must type 150 words of a previously written piece
2. When finished, ask Mr. D (that’s me) for permission to print out your new draft
3. Get Mr. D. to review your work and to give you a number of errors to locate and circle in your piece
4. With the help of classmates draw a “red circle” around ‘X’ number (usually three) of errors
5. When finished, get Mr. D. to come back again to view the errors you circled
6. Make changes on your computer screen and print out a third and final draft
7. Staple all three drafts together and submit at the end of the period

I give students a chance to review this assignment and then ask, “Does everybody understand their mission?”

Although they will say that they understand - because they want to get up and go - they don’t really, but it’s okay because the most salient point is that they are going to re-type (“re-visit”) something they wrote at least two or three days ago, and possibly two or three weeks ago. And, of course, they are going to be shocked when they discover that the piece of writing that made so much sense to them - and was so good - three days ago - makes no sense to them today. Isn’t that what we want as writing teachers? If I can get them to the computer lab to repeat this process twenty (20) or thirty (30) times in the course of the year - and I do - it will be a significant accomplishment for all of us. This is the only way that I know of that - over time - will get them to reconsider their own sentences and word choices, to get them to understand the idea of struggling and wrestling with their writing. By the way, isn’t “wrestling”

a circus activity?

But I re-emphasize here that this “Red-Circle Editing” activity is a side show. It is only a small piece of the circus. In itself it is effective partly because it is painless - students only have to draw a quick red circle around two or three mistakes - but mostly because it is connected to the Blue Carpet Theater. These are pieces that they may read to classmates. Allow me to digress again.

The Benefits of an Authentic Audience

One of the benefits of “authentic audience” that the Blue Carpet Theater facilitates is that my writers begin to “hear” their own voices (and words) more clearly. There is nothing that a seventh grader wants to do less than to fumble or stumble (to miss the hoop or drop the bowling pin) over their own words while sitting in the reader’s chair on stage in the Blue Carpet Theater - unless, of course, it is wearing an outfit that doesn’t match or getting a really bad haircut (looking like some sort of clown). Suddenly, I begin to see my students looking over what they have written prior to getting up in front of their classmates. Even more significantly, when they are home at night writing their “Nightly 150,” I believe that they begin to anticipate- naturally and organically - being in front of their classmates. I believe they begin to imagine, and to care about how their words are going to sound when that time comes. That is something else that we really want our students to experience?

Compare that to the writing that young people typically do for a teacher or a class. They write at the last minute on a topic about which they have little or no interest, submit it without much knowing or caring how it reads, and then forget about it until it comes back a week or so later with a grade - and maybe a rubric of numbers or check marks. I can pretty much guarantee at this point that a student will never consider that paper again. It is like “yelling into a black hole”- a vacuous experience.

So these two additional circus rings, “Bustin’ Out Books” and the “Nightly 150’s,” along with the side shows of “Dynamite Discussions,” “Fabulous Films,” and “Reasonable Revisions” connect with the center ring of the Blue Carpet Theater. Without this kind of interplay between activities, without this integration, the circus would not be as engaging or effective.

Every Circus Needs a Good Lion-Tamer_

“Not-So-Nasty Notices of Behavior”

Despite the great creativity of any masterful ringmaster (the teacher) and the endless fun and excitement of his three-ring circus, any language arts program has to be implemented in the real world and grounded in reality, which has been the hardest thing for me to accept over the last thirty years of my evolution as a teacher. Lions will not jump through flaming hoops nor open their mouths wide so the lion tamer can insert his head because they want to, or because they are

told to. I understand better now why my colleagues back in the day when I was first exposed to the writing pioneers Harste and Atwell were not as eager as I was to implement changes in the way they taught. It is also why writing process and workshop approaches are hard to come by, especially in public schools, today. Writing is work and human beings - especially young ones - don't want to work. The lion tamer (me) still needs "a whip and a chair" if he wants to avoid being eaten alive by his students.

I mentioned earlier giving progress reports every Monday to students whose grades are less than 77% (C). I feel it is a sound educational thought that if a twelve-year-old can keep his or her grade at C or above, then parents do not have to be involved. In fact, what we want at this age is to get parents out of the equation so that these young people can begin to find their own answers, make their own way, and detect their own "gleaming lights." But it is surprising how few parents accept this premise. It is amazing how many parents, as Jerome Harste alluded to in his "Squirrel / Jesus" anecdote, want answers and information "given" to their kids, and they want their kids to accept it.

So with a whip and a chair I enter the cage and walk the fine line between coercion and invitation. My students are required to take their progress reports home and share them with their parents. If they don't return them to me with a parent signature, then I will call their homes during the week. At that point, I hate to say it, but they get a "Double Whammy," one for their low grades and another one for not communicating at home. This is not the preferred mode of operation, but it does get more kids putting pen to paper. I continue to believe that if they do that, if they write, their writing will improve.

The other somewhat coercive method of "training" my students for the literary circus is behavior notices. I have several classroom rules which students must follow:

1. Remain seated unless you have permission to get out of your seat
2. Raise your hand in order to speak to the teacher
3. Do your (own) work
4. No taking or touching without permission
5. No horseplay
6. Be respectful
7. No talking (unless permission is given)

My classroom is not Las Vegas: what happens there, does not stay there. If students fail to follow these rules, they are issued behavior notices, which, as is the case with their progress reports, they are required to take home and share with their parents. Again, as with progress reports, if they do not return them to me with the signature of a significant adult, I call the home. The one salient point that I wish to make here is that I always give the student the first chance to express his or her point of view on whatever the behavior might have been, and I work very hard never to make them feel that I dislike them or judge them because of their behavior. I work to remain as objective as possible in a language arts classroom in which a teacher is trying to invite

and encourage thinking, writing, and sharing, asserting discipline becomes not only more important but more difficult and challenging. So much depends on the positive attitude of the kids and the teacher.

An entire book can be devoted to the administration of discipline, but I will cut it short here. Suffice it to say that without a carefully-crafted approach to discipline, no reading or writing program, of any type, is possible in a middle school. Just imagine thirty middle school kids huddled closely together on the floor, on that piece of 12'x12' blue carpet, listening to other middle-schoolers who are less than adept at communicating through writing. Imagine the shifting and the shuffling and the taking and the touching. Imagine how many circus clowns there may be in one seventh grade language arts classroom. Don't forget the administrators and parents - imagine them, too! Establishing discipline is very important and very difficult. At this point a fair question might be, "Why do we do this job?!"

Let me spend a moment on the other side of the discipline coin. Lions may need the occasional "sting of a whip," but it is also beneficial to their training to give them a little fresh meat, a little positive reinforcement, as well. So I have innovated a positive reward system in my classroom called "Doherty Dollars" (obviously, a version of a classroom economy). I would like to talk about that now. But, first, a little about reward and punishment systems in general.

Paying the Circus Performers

A Word about External Rewards

In my introduction I alluded to Jerome Harste's anecdote about "Jesus and the Squirrel" and Atwell's story about "An Upset Mother." Well, there was another speaker at that conference on writing, whose name I do not recall, but who told a story pertaining to the ineffectiveness of classroom reward systems. His very valid point was that we want kids reading and writing for the sake of reading and writing, and not for the sake of external punishments and rewards!

An old man lived near a middle school and every day kids on their way home from the school would stop outside this poor guy's house and yell disrespectful things to him.

"Hey, old man, you are ugly!"

"What's the matter, old man, can't you hobble fast-enough to catch us?"

This went on every day for awhile and the comments grew worse. There seemed to be nothing the old man could do but to take it. Then one day while the kids were insulting him, he came to his window and threw down five one-dollar bills, one for each of the boys. He told them that if they would come back tomorrow and do a really good job of insulting him, he would give them each a fifty-cent piece.

“Hey, Old man, you’re not only ugly, you’re stupid,” they said, and left.

Well, the next day they came back and worked really hard to insult him, and he kept his word by tossing down five silver coins. “Now, if you come again tomorrow, I will give you each a quarter, but try to be a little more insulting, if you can, okay?”

Well, the next day the boys did not come back. Apparently, they had decided that twenty-five cents wasn’t worth the effort. They never showed up again.

I heard this story told during a time in education (1980’s) when teachers and administrators were beginning to talk a lot about the importance of being positive with kids rather than always negative and punitive. The expression “Catch a kid doing something good” could be heard everywhere. But this particular speaker wanted to communicate the idea that “positive reinforcement” really isn’t far removed from “negative reinforcement,” and, consequently, not much better, if better at all. Anyway, he went on to tell this story about the Pizza Hut “Book It” program to try to emphasize the point

Pizza Hut apparently decided that it wanted to do something good to help education in America (they may also have decided that they needed to do something to increase their profits!) so they went into the schools promising free pizzas for kids who read. All the kids had to do was to get their parents to sign reading logs each week of how many minutes they read and, then, to turn them in to their teachers. The result of the program, according to this speaker, who, by the way, was booed by the audience for his “anti-reward” position, was that there were a bunch of little fat kids - not to mention liars -running around who hated reading.

“Doherty Dollars”

In spite of my understanding that external rewards - positive or negative - are never going to take the place of the internal rewards that we really want for our kids to experience, I do have a classroom economy (“Doherty Dollars”) in which kids receive money for their participation in class activities. With that money they can buy things like chips and soda during classroom auctions. This is an attempt to motivate some kids to read and write, but in the end it is more for fun and discussion. The greater aim is to wean kids from rewards and punishments in lieu of more intrinsic motivators.

If the reader has ever watched Drew Carey's "Whose Line Is It, Anyway?," Carey would award points to his game show participants whimsically and arbitrarily whenever and for whatever he felt like doing so. I do the same thing in my classroom. Here are a few conversations associated with "Doherty Dollars" (by the way, the kids coined the term "Doherty Dollars," not I).

"Is anybody in this room poor?"

"Would anybody like to help these unfortunate souls by giving them a few Doherty Dollars?" Then, to anyone who donates money to someone in need, I give them back double what they donated.

"I have heard - I think it's in The Bible, guys - that a man - or a woman (another good point of discussion; why is it always, "men" in The Bible?) will get back seven times whatever he gives. Now I don't know if that's true or not, but that's what I've heard."

I will also say to my students, "The rich get richer while the poor lose even what little they have. That doesn't sound right to me, but that's what it says in The Bible! Can anybody explain that?"

Some of the kids in my classroom form corporations - they can be smart and enterprising when they want to be. It is really funny when they inevitably end up fighting over what they want to buy at auctions or how they are going to split up whatever it is they finally agree to buy.

"Does anybody here think that wealth is distributed fairly in America?" I will ask. This is especially appropriated when we read John Steinbeck's *The Pearl*.

My students often tell me that my distribution of Doherty Dollars is "unfair." I always tell them that I, too, feel their pain because, I tell them, "I am one of the hardest working men in America, but I get paid very little, while PGA golfers can make a million dollars in one weekend.

I talk to them about inflation. I start out the year giving them one-dollar bills. Of course, after two weeks a handful of hardworking kids may accumulate twenty of the bills while others have received none. This causes some kids to lose interest because they feel they can never catch up. But then, one day, I begin distributing twenty-dollar bills or fifty-dollar bills instead of "ones;" then every kid has the potential, once again, to become the wealthiest kid in the class with one lucky payment.

I also help out the math teacher with large number concepts, especially the concept of number place holders and exponents (one billion is ten to the power of nine). The currency in my class gets into the decillions of dollars. Then I might say, "Isn't it funny how in Italy something relatively inexpensive such as a taxi cab ride might cost \$10,000 lira?" At some point in the year kids will pay \$20,000,000,000,000,000,000 (that's twenty sextillion dollars if you were wondering) for a can of Coke - decaf, of course.

Where I have the most fun is going to garage sales on weekends to find items to sell to my students at auctions. I once found a box of 250 mechanical pencils for \$2. A recent great find was a collection of several stuffed elephants which I will be auctioning off during our reading of Lois Lowry's *The Giver*. If the reader is familiar with the imagery of elephants in that book, they will see the beauty in this connection.

During our reading of *Call of the Wild* one year, I was able to auction-off a large and beautiful white wolf. Notebooks, paperback novels, gift certificates, chips and sodas (still their favorite), blow pops, playing cards, book markers (cool ones from Borders, etc.), picture frames, you name it - but I always try to find things connected to the novels and other subject matter of my class. Nice hardcover copies of books we read can be purchased on Amazon for as little as \$2 sometimes and make great auction items. It is so much fun.

The auctions bring up many other age-appropriate learning experiences for my kids: Often they miscount their money. More often they leave it at home. "Oh, I'm sorry," I say, genuinely sympathetic.

"Does a taped or repaired dollar bill still count?" they often ask.

"I think John is photocopying (counterfeiting) Doherty Dollars," is an inevitable accusation. Accordingly, I have explored many anti-counterfeiting strategies.

"John is bidding money he doesn't have!" Students always try to force the price of something up during an auction when they, themselves, don't have the money to pay. If a student is caught, this would be an occasion for a behavior notice as it is disrespectful. Now the student has to go home to explain his behavior to significant adults.

The Doherty Dollars classroom economy just goes on and on, and it continues to evolve and take on new life. In the end I think, and certainly hope, that it does more to discourage competition and working for external rewards than it does to promote them. Ideas of capitalism and socialism do come up frequently and the program gives my students the opportunity not only to talk about those ideas, but to experience them as well.

Assorted Clowns, Acrobats, and Elephants

In the section under the heading "Circus Side Shows," I listed several other features of my program that feed my three-ring circus. Before I close, let me just say a few words about those other features. As pertains to studying novels, I mentioned "Gorgeous (literary) Groups," "Crazy Connections (to literature)," "Vivid and Vivacious visuals," and "Research Riches." Let me use S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* to illustrate briefly how these work and fit into the circus. But first a little philosophy.

What to Teach: Literature or Literacy? Ideas or Skills?

There is much conversation these days among language teachers about the distinction between "teaching the ideas of great writers" and "teaching the literary skills of particular curricula" (Hey, I like that, "particulah curriculah," Cool! Sorry.) Many say that it doesn't matter what particular novel or other literary work a teacher presents; it only matters what literacy skills he or she teaches through that novel. I disagree with this thinking for several reasons, the simplest

and least controversial being that a teacher should not teach a work of literature that he or she does not know really well. If I am going to guide students through a novel, I want to be an expert on that novel. It's not that I plan to beat my students (my circus animals) over the head with my expertise, but I do have to know what I am talking about in order to give them enough to inspire them to want to make their own interpretations.

Therefore, if an administrator were to say to me, "Mr. Doherty, I would like for you to take *The Outsiders* out of your syllabus and replace it with Isaac Asimov's *Fantastic Voyage*, I would feel, at least the first couple of times I presented it, that my students would not have as good a literary experience as they have with my presentation of S.E. Hinton's work. I would have to spend a great deal of time developing materials and activities to supplement the new novel. And, though some will say this is just a figment of an immature teacher, even at the ripe old age of 57 I would not be as excited about presenting Isaac Asimov's novel.

Nancie Atwell once asked the question, "Why would anyone choose to teach a book or a poem - or whatever - about which he or she doesn't feel really strongly?" This is another one of the many statements that she made back in 1985 that startled me in its simplicity and truth. The reason I became a teacher is that I love literature and language, not because I want to administer a state curriculum. Aside from having to start from scratch in developing a unit and all its ancillary materials for *Fantastic Voyage*, I simply do not love that novel; the natural energy and enthusiasm that I feel for *The Outsiders* would not be there.

There are more profound reasons for my personal belief that the teaching of ideas - of the great thoughts of the great minds - is of more importance than the clinical teaching of skills and state curriculum, but there is no need to go into those reasons here. But, of course, I would never argue that helping kids to develop their literacy skills isn't important; it's just a question of priority.

Discovering Author's Purpose

I always say to my students, "We are not 'reading books' in this class; we are 'studying literature.'" After they have finished a book such as the *The Outsiders*, that is, after they have read it, heard it on tape, answered two hundred comprehension questions, discussed various scenes and themes, and seen Francis Ford Coppola's film version, they are ready to begin analyzing the text. "Okay, guys, is everybody ready to read the book again?" I ask..

"What? We have to read the book again?" they respond, incredulous, though they love the book.

"Yes," I say, "you can't understand a novel after just one reading."

"C'mon, Mr. D., get a life!" someone says.

“Well,” I say, “the good news is that when you read a book for the second time, you don’t have to start on page one and read it cover to cover again. You can skip around to different parts and make discoveries about the cool connections that the author has made.” The fact that I have to explain this idea to them says a lot about their literary experience, or lack of it.

One illustration of “literary depth” in *The Outsiders* should be sufficient to emphasize how the circus side shows: “Gorgeous (literary) Groups,” Crazy Connections (to literature),” and “Vivid and Vivacious Visuals” work, and how they are made more meaningful by the other parts of my circus.

Through details of his speech, actions, appearance, and the opinions of other characters, Johnny Cade is portrayed by S.E. Hinton as a Christ-figure. Consider the following details from the novel:

1. The first words used to describe Johnny Cade are “last and least.”
2. Johnny writes in the dust of a church floor, “Be back soon, J.C.”
3. Johnny dies when a piece of wood (timber) falls “across his back.”
4. Johnny is non-violent and dies too young having never traveled far from home.
5. Johnny saves children from a “red Hell.”
6. Johnny is a fugitive but decides to turn himself in to the police.
7. Johnny’s face is “red marked and sweat-streaked” while saving the children.

If I were to teach Isaac Asimov’s *Fantastic Voyage*, I would need a year or two to discover such literary connections - of course, which is assuming such connections can be found in Asimov’s novel. Many books written for adolescents are literarily vacant. Having read *Fantastic Voyage* twice, I know that it offers entertainment and some knowledge pertaining to human anatomy, and I am not “downing” the book or the writer by any means; I just do not believe that it contains the literary depth of *The Outsiders*.

“Gorgeous (literary) Groups”

Having been really steeped in Hinton’s literary text, my students are now ready to work in their “Literary Groups” to explore the novel for details like the ones listed above. I want to lead them toward the author’s literary presentations, but I don’t expect them to swallow swords; my intent is not to force interpretations down their throats. I also have to ensure them that, though Johnny Cade may be a Christ-figure, my class is not Sunday school, and that teaching religion is not my goal. At the same time they do need to understand that western culture and literature is full of Biblical allusion.

After all is said and done, the kids and their group mates get excited when they begin to learn how to go more deeply into the books they have read. They take pride in what they have learned, and, of course, they get excited to present their own interpretations to their classmates.

“Vivid and Vivacious Visuals”

The students are also set-up now to write perhaps a five-paragraph essay on a character in *The Outsiders* based on details that they, themselves, have uncovered. “Vibrant and Vivacious Visuals” are graphic representations (artwork) of literary ideas drawn and colored, or cut-and-pasted, on 11x17 paper. These vibrant literary visuals look beautiful on the walls of my classroom and help all the students to better understand literary elements and devices. The visuals also serve as graphic organizers for essays the students will write. Each novel chosen for my circus lends itself well to one or another aspect of literature. *The Outsiders* lends itself well to the study of characterization, *The Pearl* (Steinbeck) to imagery, *I am the Cheese* (Cormier) to establishing mood, and *Call of the Wild* (London) to conflict, to mention a few examples.

“Crazy Connections (to literature)”

The Outsiders is full of automobiles. Is there anything that a middle school kid might dream about more than owning a shiny new car? What about a restored 1965 Mustang convertible, cherry-red, like the one Cherry Valance drives in the novel? There is also the car that made Ralph Nader famous - the Corvair, the car in which many teenagers died rounding curves because of its poor aerodynamic design. I found a five-minute infomercial filmed in the 1960's about the Corvair and showed it to my students on the big LCD screen, complete with surround sound. Did you know that there was also an amphibious version of the Corvair?" I plan to have students find and present such "U-Tube- type" pieces that bring to light some of the aspects of the novels we read. Doing these presentations on an intermittent but regular basis, two or three students presenting per week, will add color and flavor to the class - sort of like a trip to the Circus concession stand.

“Research Riches”

I am also experimenting with the idea of having students build model cars of the period. They will do some research on their model cars and write short pieces of historical fiction. The Mustang, '58 Chevy, or whatever car they choose to build and research will serve as the catalyst for the story they will write. Perhaps a group of teenagers are out on a Friday night in 1964. What will happen to them? Where will they be going? What are they wearing? What is playing on the radio? This, I think, is a good way to get kids to do research and then to “manipulate” the information they find rather than just copying it. It is more in keeping with the creativity that real research requires and less so with plagiarizing.

Packing Up the Circus

In the end the goal is to engage readers and writers because the simple fact is that if a kid does a lot of reading and writing, he or she will get better at reading and writing. More importantly they will develop more confidence in their own thinking.

Let me close with another quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson (“Self-Reliance”).

“To trust your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men; that, is genius. Speak your latent conviction and it shall become the universal sense. For the inmost in due time becomes the outmost, and our first thoughts are rendered back to us by the trumpets of the last judgment.”

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This book describes a classroom writing workshop in action. It is the essential book for all teachers of young writers. It turns language arts instruction upside down and removes the teacher’s “big desk” from the classroom. The teacher becomes learner and researcher along with his or her students. Nancie Atwell started it all for me.