

Moving Journals Beyond the Banal

Twenty years ago I was sent to a tough inner-city school in San Francisco. It served kids from three of the most difficult housing projects in the city, one of which, a high-rise, has since been torn down because of its dangerous conditions.

I was new to teaching English; my preceding decade had been spent in the lovely labor of working with very young children in early childhood education. These new kids—middle-schoolers, some taller than I, many heavier than I—astonished me. They swaggered. They swore. They were quick to anger, both at other students and at teachers. They were tough-skinned (they needed to be), but slowly, over the course of months, revealed an inner tenderness and vulnerability that moved me deeply. They were *kids*, after all, and subject to the same emotional storms kids weather. Only their storms had more torment to them, and often had to do with matters of life and death.

AN ADMISSION: EARLY ERRORS

A writer, I wanted my students to write—to jump-start a process that could sharpen their articulation. Writing was easy for me, and I wanted them to discover it to be easy. But with a few exceptions, their skills were low. They'd write a sentence where a paragraph was called for, a paragraph instead of a well-developed essay.

Did they have anything to write about? They sure did: day-to-day experiences so deep that I was in awe, experiences that—embarrassed as I am to admit it now—the writer in me envied. Such material!

I'd read a little about kids' having success in writing journals. So why not try journals? A good idea, certain to succeed.

The kids were given folders. *Write "My Journal" on these, I told them, and your name. We were off on our writing adventure, I thought. Now, for the next five minutes of the period, write in your journal. You can write anything you want.*

What a liberal feeling: empowering students to write their thoughts and feelings. Surely this largesse would engender more fluent writing; surely this would lead to the Elysian fields of write-at-a-moment's-notice fluency. And imagine! A ready-made activity to get kids to settle down during the first five minutes of class!

But instead of focused—or even discursive—mini-essays on the deep love and violence and complexity each student was experiencing every day, here's what I got on Monday:

I woke up at 7:00 today. Right on time. I ate breakfast. The bus was on time. I was on time for school, but I went to the donut shop so I was late. My teacher yelled.

Then, on Tuesday,

I woke up at 7:10 today. My alarm didn't go off. I didn't have time to eat breakfast. But the bus was on time. I was on time for school. No donut shop today. My teacher didn't yell.

And so on, from student after student, day after day.

Were they writing? Yes, they were writing. And yes, too, the class was quiet for five minutes, the students compliant. But I was disappointed: why wasn't I getting the depth that I sought? Why were their entries so short? Aha: that was it. Too little time!

The next day I announced, *OK, you guys. These journals are really short. I'm going to raise the time to ten minutes so that you can get more writing done. So starting today. . . .*

You've probably predicted what I got:

Monday:

I woke up at 7:00 today. I was really, really, really sleepy. I took a shower. I ate breakfast. It was frosted flakes. The bus was late, so I was late for school. Half an hour late. My teacher got mad. It was my fourth time to be late for her class. She got really mad this time.

Was it more writing? Sure. Meaningful? Not what I was hoping for: a mere sequential recall of the morning's events. The journals weren't working.

Teachers reading this book have probably had a good laugh already. These were a rookie's mistakes: too little setup ("anticipatory set," as it's sometimes called),

instructions far too vague, time far too short, and an overall sense of nonchalance on the teacher's part that invited reciprocal nonchalance in students. Overarching goals? Absent. Assessment? None. Student responsibility? None. *Doomed*: the journals were a dismal failure.

The year proceeded, English-teacher-overwhelm occurred by November, and by January I'd abandoned the journals. *Journals just don't work for me*, I decided, and focused instead on essay practice.

Yet, not surprisingly, my essay practice failed, too. Though I was proudly liberal-minded in allowing students to make copious spelling errors in early drafts and twist their syntax like grammatical contortionists, their essays remained thin in both volume and content: emaciated reflections of who they were as human beings.

A new year started. I took workshops. One workshop turned me on to response journals, sometimes called "dialectical journals," in which kids write, on the left side of a vertically folded paper, a textual quote, and record their responses on the right. There was success with that, and, perhaps desperate for any elicited writing, I used dialectical journals madly, daily, and "ran them into the ground" with the kids. They couldn't stand them after four months.

More workshops, then: about "exchange-response journals," wherein students write, exchange papers with another, write responses, and repeat the process.

Those worked well, but I had a difficult time using exchange journals consistently while controlling what I perceived to be gossip entries. I wanted to give kids freedom, a sense of ownership over their own writing, yet I didn't want my English class to degenerate into a roomful of kids writing teacher-approved notes in class, all under the aegis of "freewriting," rationalized by the idea that kids will achieve fluency and ultimate writing depth if they scribble notes to each other on subjects of their own choosing—often, alas, about crushes on boys, on girls, or about parties. So the peer journals went their way, too, and another year passed.

Another year, another workshop. This time, the presenter, a teacher, casually mentioned that he'd had some recent success in journal entries in which kids needed to write a certain amount in a certain time. The idea intrigued me, but seemed anti-intellectual. It implied that quantity and not quality was important. It seemed to ignore kids who were thoughtful, introspective, or slow thinkers and writers. It was artificial. (And what about subject matter? Could a student be expected to do a genuine "freewrite" given a time and length limit? Wouldn't such an idea kill any modicum of creativity? And how would you grade the darned things?)

Surprisingly, though, when I tried timed freewrites I noticed that about half of my students responded: they rose to the occasion and wrote more volubly than ever before. Some, I was shocked to discover, even ventured past the invisible fence of mere recapitulation of daily routines and out into realm of ideas. *Oh boy, oh boy*, I thought; their journals reflected less a diary gestalt and more an overall sense of “journalness”—a focused, sometimes discursive, lively reflection on a subject I’d suggest.

I was onto something; I knew it. I read: Donald Graves, Lucy Calkins, others. Though the years were passing, I now felt closer to the locus of what I believed was truly elicited, “student-owned” writing.

I made some decisions. I stayed with the timed journal (a good thing), institutionalized it as a twice-weekly activity (another good thing), and succeeded in communicating to kids that the endeavor was important.

But I continued making mistakes, too. The prompts I wrote on the board were sometimes ambiguous and always too short, giving kids little to work with. I expected lots of writing per session, yet was vague on exactly how much was satisfactory. I gave kids too little time to work, and a sense of frustration and hostility gradually arose around the journals. When I increased the time allotted, I began having class management problems in keeping kids quiet. I tried playing music on my cheap stereo boom box, and though it seemed to help, the music sent through those tinny speakers was banal tripe from a limited repertoire.

However, beyond a doubt, I was getting better writing in these journals than ever before—in essay work kids were writing more fluently than previous classes. Nonetheless, the process needed refining. It lacked clarity, and the kids—quite cooperative, really—let me know explicitly and implicitly.

The summer’s break gave me time to think. I felt that the skeletal structure of the journal program was strong, but it needed some muscle on its bones. When I went back that next September, things broke loose in these journals, and they’ve been a wild, wonderful ride ever since—the highest, most joyous experience of my teaching every year.

WHAT CHANGED?

A few things changed, and their alteration made all the difference. The prompts I wrote on the board were longer, more energetic, their subject matter unafraid; they were multilayered in what they asked of kids. While sticking with the twice-weekly

schedule, I increased the time to twenty minutes to give kids room to do what I asked: write long, thoughtful, focused entries.

Usually there are a bunch of questions up on the board. I usually answer each question in a paragraph so everything would be in place. I think the questions really help because it gets us really thinking.

—Anderson Ren

I gave the kids *prerogative*: choose the topic on the board or write on a topic of their own, as long as theirs was on a subject and not a mere laundry list of what they did yesterday or last Tuesday.

I usually write on something else; I don't like to write on the topic. I write fast because I write on things I like, and when it is interesting I can write very fast.

—Betty Yee

It might be second nature to many teachers, but local teacher research has demonstrated the motivational value of giving students choice in learning. Student buy-in to content as well as process grows dramatically when they have an opportunity to make selections about what they will study. (See “Tim’s Advice” in Appendix D to read about the power of choice.)

I established clear guidelines for grading, and while retaining my relaxed stance on spelling and syntax (journals are first-draft work, after all), insisted on a modicum of neatness. Finally, I bought a decent but inexpensive stereo and began collecting and playing instrumental music of many genres—each among the best of its kind.

One thing that really helps is the music. It's not too loud because it doesn't distract me from doing my journal. Actually, it helps me even write more. It makes me feel calm. None of the music has words. If it did, I think it would be distracting.

—Anderson Ren

I've stayed with it, refined it, queried the kids at midyear and year-end toward improving the process, implemented many of their suggestions, and established in my classroom a program that still stuns me. (As I write this, the picture of my student Teakeysha is still fresh: Teakeysha, who yesterday got my attention during Journal Time, silently holding up her paper, on which in a dozen minutes she'd easily filled an entire side. I see the proud look on her face: Teakeysha—the one who complained mightily when I explained our journal protocol three weeks ago. . . .)

What comes next, then, dear colleague, is a step-by-step rendering of that program, carved with the blade of kids' imperatives: imperatives both voiced by them and communicated behaviorally. This program works if one of your aims is to achieve fluency in student writing, depth in the subject matter, and “drop of a dime” ability in students to write in a way that is either focused or discursive, depending upon the moment's demand.

This journal process has grown as I have grown. In it I have found not only convincing evidence of writing growth in individual students but also a real plumbing of the depths in their writing. And, not least, I've found the bonus of a contagious and communal joy.

So what I'll lay out here is the protocol for what I've come to call Fluency Journals: words on assessing the journals, what works and why it works (sometimes what *doesn't* and why it doesn't), other issues germane to the practice, and enough “prompts” from which to choose for more than an entire school year.

FLUENCY JOURNALS AS PRACTICE

I use the word *practice* less in the sense of repetition—connoting, at its most negative, a child forced to practice piano—and more in the Buddhist sense: a kind of meditation to which one (the teacher, the student) is committed, and to which one

attends, is present for, regularly. It is a quiet study: a study for the teacher in getting to know the students deeply, and a study for students in self-discovery.

I like Journal Time because it's peaceful.

—Amy Yan

When Mr. Fleming puts his music on, it's like relaxing your mind and it puts you to think more.

—Eva Velasquez

Before long, community is created: community not of master and acolytes but of guide and guided: a guide whose role it is to establish and maintain safety, to suggest—even if such suggestions sometimes go ignored by the guided, who, quickly familiar with the lay of the land, feel confident to move on.

That's what we're all about, isn't it?

INSPIRATION FOR THE NAME

The name of the program, *Rain, Steam, and Speed*, is based on a mid-nineteenth-century English painting by J.M.W. Turner. The scene is of a steam train rushing forward through driving rain, framed on one side by people boating, and on the other, by folks plowing a field. The picture is associated with the railway frenzy that swept across England at this time. To us it suggests the power of determination and focus in developing thoughtful literacy.

In the classroom, the “Rain” tying the scene together is the music strand that supports the students’ deep focus and steady writing; the “Steam”—the driving force—is the set of prompts that provide writing departure points to tap students’ interests and open them to the larger world, and the “Speed” is the momentum built by the structured routine for writing that students follow twice a week. When the rhythm of these three components gets established, we think you will find that your students’ writing will become more thoughtful, more correct, and more substantial. In addition, students will develop more confidence as writers and thinkers.

I would say journal writing has greatly improved my writing because I feel less shy about expressing my ideas and thoughts. . . . Before, I hated expressing my ideas in fear that people would make a public mockery of me or my ideas.

—Elena Escalante

Through validation, feedback, systematic practice, and examples, students will be able to transfer what they've learned to expository writing assignments and projects in other subjects. Finally, the fluency development program presented here provides significant student support for the demands of the many writing tests required of students.

This time produces a mind quick to react to any topic given spontaneously, and that would be more than useful in the torturous SAT-9 (standardized test).

—Charles Kwan

As you observe improved fluency in your students, we hope that *Rain, Steam, and Speed* will alter the way you (teachers!) think about journal writing. Unlike so many journal programs that are largely busywork, lack focus, and present enormous reading demands for teachers without a clearly defined purpose, *Rain, Steam, and Speed* contains a system of accountability that directs improvement and simplifies evaluation. Come explore the simple power of *Rain, Steam, and Speed*.

I am able to write almost two times as much as I started with. I used to hate writing, but it is different now.

—George Zhu