

What do You See?

Creative Writing Demonstration 7-23-02 by Anna Barker, Crosswinds East Metro Arts and Science Middle School... "to provide opportunities for students from urban and suburban districts to enhance achievement and experience diversity in a year-round education program."

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Presented at the Minnesota Writing Project Summer Selective Institute with Nellie, chocolate lab and Companion Animal Assisted Therapist.

Writing is taught at Crosswinds not only for the curricular connections it has across all disciplines but also for the connections it has to diversity. Creative writing is like music for me. It is alive in many different types of songs. Helping all students to sing or give voice to the music inside them is my goal. I believe that the ability to write well and express oneself is like a smile - a universal touchstone to others. Writing is a skill of timeless importance. It transcends our human limitations as beings who have finite physical lifespans and puts us on the plane with great inventors, musicians, and painters who have transformed civilization for the better. Words do not die. What we do as teachers of writing and as writers ourselves (two sides of the same coin if our "currency" is to be useful) is to give our students a voice that can be heard across the ages and have lasting and beneficial impact.

So how do I teach creative writing? Not alone. I use wisdom from the past, best-practices from the present (such as those shared during this Institute - thank you, colleagues!), and I use my dog. Here's one reason why: "The best way to teach subjects is in coherence with the rest of life, so that the children can see the purpose of the instruction and the practical value of what they are learning and to teach them to think for themselves." These words were written in 1931 by the psychiatrist Alfred Adler in his book *What Life Should Mean to You*. He dedicated it to "the human family in the hope that its members may learn from these pages to understand themselves better."

Adler and I believe that "If a teacher is to attract the interest of a child, the teacher must understand what the child's interests have been previously and convince the child that he can make a success in this interest and in others. "When a child feels confident on one point it is easier to stimulate him in other points also. From the first, therefore, we should find out how the child looks at the world and which sense organ has occupied most of his attention and been trained to the highest degree." Nellie and her star quilt are journalistic tools that I use to help figure this out and teach writing that is connected to my students' lives. She is old and safe and mostly non-allergenic. She shows unconditional acceptance and love for youth who otherwise might not have it in their lives. She is gentle and listens well. Her wagging tail seems to inspire students to tell their own tales. Please circle up and we'll do just one of the myriad writing activities that I do with dear Nellie. She was named after Nellie Bly, the ground-breaking 19th C. reporter; check her out!

The main points I will cover in this Demonstration are:

1. Diversity of perspective - it is to be acknowledged and celebrated; indeed, it is the basis of teamwork and collaboration which are skills vital for citizens of this century.
2. Appreciation of a variety of viewpoints - multiple ways of seeing and communicating are essential to the nurturing of writing; there is more than one "right" way to get the Job of writing done. Multiple genre writing is encouraged.

Nellie Demonstration

1. Writers/artists form an "inner" circle around her and the Star Quilt. Have a fellow participant-partner in "outer circle" with whom to edit. Give participants choice as to who goes where. (Anna B. believes that giving students lots of choices is one way of showing respect).
2. "Hi, Nellie! May I please borrow your quilt?" Walk it around the circle and ask writers to either draw or write about what they see. Take time to go slowly and let them have an opportunity to fully concentrate on the details of their observations.
3. Thank Nellie and let her lie down again. Ask writers to share what they observed with their partner/editor in the outer circle. Have partner add his/her perspective and record all observations to use in a poem.
4. Talk about the Experiential Education Model: What? So what? Now what? Reflect on "So what did we Just do/learn? " Anna B. believes that reflections like these are an essential part of the Writing Process).
5. Ask all partners to find a comfortable place and collaborate for 10 minutes on a Poem for Two Voices (refer to Paul Fleischman's technique displayed in *Joyful Noise*, shared in the resource books Deb Kruse-Field brought in last week.)
6. Give 10-15 minutes to do this and take a "practice break" before those who would like to read theirs out loud share with the whole group.
7. Thank participants for writing and sharing this morning. Invite follow-up questions.

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