

By Marla Robertson and Amanda Goss

Can We Do It? Developing Students' Identities as Readers and Writers in Today's High-Stakes Classrooms



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Amanda Goss, a high school English teacher in Texas, wrote this blog one night in response to a hallway conversation she overheard between students bragging about how quickly they wrote their weekly blog posts. A teacher might respond with a lecture on the importance of completing writing assignments to the best of your ability, but Amanda went home and wrote her own blog post to share with her students the next day.

The Unexpected

Finding money in your coat pocket. A fire alarm at a school choir concert. A student that stops by and leaves a sticky note about the impact you have made. Every day there are things that pop up unexpectedly. Some good. Some bad. Yet, how do we respond?

I expect to see writing assignments that are completed in mere minutes before students crash into their beds, tired from busy schedules. I expect to see reading check tests bombed because

of pages left unread. I expect to see commas where they don't belong and missing where they do. My reaction? Usually, one of frustration or disappointment.

However, on a regular basis I'm surprised by the unexpected. I have the privilege of reading personal narratives that give a glimpse into the heart as students write with bravery and courage about loss, relationships, and triumphs. Students share exposition about their passions with knowledge and expertise, and I'm convinced that they will one day have a career doing what they love. Students take an extra few minutes to stay and share about a book they have recently devoured. How do I respond? Perhaps, without enough celebration ...

(Excerpt of blog posted on October 14, 2013; for entire post, see <http://agoss.edublogs.org/2013/10/14/the-unexpected/>)

This piece of writing was not recycled from the year before but written as a personal response to things that were happening in her life as a teacher right then, in the moment. She wanted to refocus the classroom community on celebrating the students who had posted on time, who had shared a part of themselves, who had taken risks with their language. She used her own writing as an avenue to accomplish this.

While Amanda and I (Marla) work with different students for different purposes—I teach literacy courses for preservice and inservice teachers at the university level and Amanda teaches high school English—we have worked together several times during summer writing camps for adolescent learners, conducting classroom research, and as colleagues in the local National Writing Project site. Through these common learning experiences, we have come to share the belief that the overarching goal of teaching English language arts at any level is to develop students who are confident in their abilities to learn and grow through reading and writing for both their personal and professional lives. The curriculum is important. The state and professional standards are important. Passing whatever test is currently required at the local, state, or federal level is important. But all of those things are in support of developing students who believe in themselves as readers and writers—who have a reader and writer identity.

There is concern with some educators that there is not enough authentic writing instruction, particularly in secondary classrooms, and that in some classrooms, writing is not being taught at all (Applebee & Langer, 2006). In fact, some speculate that high-stakes testing contexts may be responsible for narrowing the curriculum (Afflerbach, 2005; Au, 2007; Berliner, 2011) and for influencing decisions about the type of writing instruction based on characteristics of the test (Applebee & Langer, 2011; Hillocks, 2002). Although these statements may have some truth to them, we believe that even in high-stakes testing contexts, incorporating authentic writing instruction is feasible. Writing instruction that helps create an environment that nurtures caring relationships, values high expectations for long-term success, is culturally responsive to students, and nurtures a reading and

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writing identity is possible. We will share our thinking on how we strive to accomplish this in our classrooms.

Setting Conditions

In order for students to develop an identity as a reader and writer, we have learned to establish specific conditions in our classrooms (Patterson, Holladay, & Eoyang, 2013; Patterson, Wickstrom, Robertson, Araujo, & Hoki, 2010). For example, as teachers, we believe that in order to help our students develop their reader and writer identity, we have to model that identity ourselves. That means thinking about how we use reading and writing in our own personal and professional lives as tools to learn and grow and sharing that thinking with our students. It is not just about telling our students *that* we read and write. It is sharing with them *what* we read and write. This means that we base all decisions about curriculum, calendars, lessons, and activities with that goal in mind—setting conditions in our classrooms so that students can develop an identity as a reader and writer.

Another important condition is developing a community of learners in our classrooms (Rogoff, 1990; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). We want our students to see us as experts in the classroom but also as co-learners. We want students to know we are learning about teaching from experiences with them and through our own desire to continue to improve as professionals. In order for this type of learning environment to develop, we focus on building relationships between ourselves and our students as well as among the students themselves. We believe that within this type of environment, a reader and writer identity can develop through intentional learning opportunities.

Amanda's Story

In the following sections, Amanda tells her story about how three classroom practices—using mentor texts, playing with language, and reading and writing for authentic audiences and purposes—provide her opportunities to model herself as a reader

Workshop

During workshop you will be working as readers and writers. During this time, I will conference with individual students to see how you are doing, provide suggestions or feedback, and assess your progress. You can make choices about the best way to use your workshop time; however, you are responsible for turning in your assignments on time. We often have more than one assignment we are working on at a time.

Writer's Notebook

Every day you will need your composition notebook. Writers and artists keep notebooks to gather all sorts of ideas and language that can be used in writing. If you overhear an interesting conversation, write it in your notebook. If you see something funny on the way to school, write it in your notebook. You never know when these little tidbits of writing might help you on a larger piece. Writers need a place where they can play with words, be creative, and respond to texts and ideas without the fear of making a mistake. We will Quickwrite, begin drafts, keep track of our reading, write notes, and play with language in our notebooks. Have them in class everyday. No excuses!

Xerox

According to Wikipedia, "Xerox 914 was the first plain paper photocopier using the process of Electro-photography, (later changed to xerography) discovered by Chester Carlson, which he developed with John H. Dessauer"

If I copy something for you it is probably important enough to keep up with. I will do my best to post all handouts and notes on my webpage as well. Please use the resources that are provided for you.



You

I believe that your life matters and you have important experiences and ideas to share with the world. I am asking you to take risks and write from life about things that make you feel deeply and matter to you. I believe in the power of writing to help us figure out who we are, what we know, and what we want to become. I believe in the power of words to change the world for better or worse, and I want you to leave my room more prepared to grapple with any kind of text you encounter. You each come with different strengths you can offer to our classroom community. I'm looking forward to getting to know you and reading and writing with you this year.



<http://www.catholicchapterhouse.com/blog/2012/07/18/you-is-kind-you-is-smart-you-is-important/>

Zoo

While I probably will feed you at times throughout the year, I do not want to clean up after you. I don't want to touch your tissues, pick-up your trash, or find your gum underneath the desk. I spend my own personal money for books and supplies in this classroom, and I ask that you treat our classroom with respect. As my mother always told me, "leave a room cleaner than when you entered it."

Figure 1. Excerpt from "Encyclopedia of a Workshop Classroom"; see fuller document on the blog post "Epic Win in English" <http://agoss.edublogs.org/2012/09/02/epic-win-in-english/>

and writer and in turn help develop her students' identities as readers and writers. She shares why she believes each practice is vital, illustrates with an example of her writing she has shared with students, and provides an example of how the practice has impacted her students. She highlights how sharing her literary life influences her relationships with students and how she integrates preparing students for required assessments with allowing them to develop as readers and writers.

Use of Mentor Texts

I want my students to understand that writers use mentor texts; our reading nourishes our writing abilities. For example, prior to the start of the 2012-2013 school year, I was eager to find a way to share my beliefs and values with students during the first days of school. I had been introduced to the *Encyclopedia of an Ordinary Life* (Rosenthal, 2005) in Penny Kittle's Art of Fiction class at the University of New Hampshire Summer Literacy Institute. Using this autobiography told from A to Z as a mentor text, I created

my "Encyclopedia of a Workshop Classroom" (see Figure 1 for an excerpt). It evolved into a genre study as my classes and I discussed the difference between communicating information in the traditional, required syllabus versus this personal "encyclopedia." Just as this mentor text helped me "re-vision" my work in a way that was more creative, I want my students to utilize other authors as a launching pad for what they can create.

My students will be expected to produce expository and persuasive essays, so the narrative "Indian Education" by Sherman Alexie might be the first mentor text to abandon if we were focused only on the writing demands of state tests. However, when we read narrative, students practice noticing the author's craft and analyzing the effect of literary devices. Our work with narrative mentor texts not only enhances their writing but also develops the analysis skills crucial for success on standardized reading tests.

Ashley (all student names are pseudonyms) was a dyslexic student in my on-level English I class who often struggled to complete her work because of the challenges and distractions at home. I was super impressed with how she emulated the structure of "Indian Education" to craft a powerful narrative about the influence of her brother over time. She was able to move seamlessly from moments they shared as kids to saying goodbye at the airport. I love to see evidence of how mentor texts introduced in minilessons influence my students' writing and their identity as writers. Although targeted as a student at-risk of failing, Ashley wrote an expository essay on

the state assessment that received satisfactory ratings by both state scorers. The lessons we learn about the power of story and crafting our words and sentences as we study mentor texts are foundational to our work on academic essays.

Playing with Language

Playing with language was a concept that was foreign to me as a high school student, but I don't want to rob my own students of opportunities to revise at the sentence and word level just for fun. Rhetorical devices can seem daunting and thus reserved for the AP Language classroom, but I have found that even students who struggle with the English language can make comparisons, select impactful diction, and imitate sentence structures. In an English 2 class, I asked my students to quickwrite a letter to our principal convincing her that we should be allowed to have a Halloween party. I correctly believed that my students would make many of the moves professional writers use to persuade. I took ideas and phrases from each student's quickwrite to compile a formal letter to our principal. We analyzed the finished letter as a class, and students quickly realized that they had generated all the content and rhetorical devices. This shared writing within our community

not only helped to build confidence with persuasive writing but also created an authentic context to notice, name, and analyze rhetorical devices.

Dear Ms. Fischer,

... On Halloween, or any other holiday that falls on a school day, it is natural for students to be unfocused thinking about plans with friends or family. Some of our classmates will not be able to celebrate with their families, and we would like to have the opportunity to celebrate this holiday together as friends. Ms. Fischer, don't you remember in elementary school when we had parties for Halloween and Christmas and Valentine's Day? In high school, we never get a break from all the pressure and stress of due dates, assignments, and tests. We miss those times to just relax and be kids. We know we *have* growing responsibilities as young adults, so we should get to be kids for one class period, right? This party would help us relax and unwind from the stress of school for an hour and a half, allowing us to concentrate when necessary during our other classes. ...

We have a dream where classes can *have* parties without consequences. ... In all seriousness, we understand why there are limits to bringing food and throwing parties, but we hope you will see that our hard work and good behavior should merit this privilege. We should *have* the opportunity to clear our minds and take a break as we enjoy a simple holiday together as friends. This party would be greatly appreciated, but we do need one thing, your approval. Please consider our proposal and join us for food and celebration on October 31st.

With hope from your 10th Grade Students,
Ms. Goss' A2 English Class

Students need low risk opportunities to play with language, but they also need to see how their choices impact an audience. I have challenged students to make posters with rhetorical devices for my door that persuade students to bring back my classroom books and Valentine's Day cards with literary devices wooing the audience of their choice. In our writer's notebooks, we often take time to imitate professional authors as we learn to craft our sentences with phrases and clauses, and we always take time to share our trials with other classmates. All of these informal opportunities allow us to focus on sentence patterns and the conventions of the English language. At the end of the year, I have my students create multigenre projects focused on a social issue of their choice. I am always excited to see how they use powerful language to motivate others to action for an issue that matters to them. After each student presents, I invite fellow students to comment on what they noticed about the use of language in the project. I love to hear a student compliment a classmate on the use of parallelism or notice that the use of anaphora creates an effective emotional appeal.

I want my students to recognize the power of language to impact an audience and feel confident in taking risks with their writing.

Although students often have choice with topics and genre, they are consistently being asked to make claims, provide evidence to support their ideas, craft introductions and conclusions, utilize a variety of sentence patterns, and select their words carefully. I explicitly teach my students strategies and structures to use on state writing exams because I have seen the impact a failing result can have on the identity of a student. However, I want our classroom community to be focused on so much more than passing a test. Embedding necessary test skills in authentic reading and writing activities can be a challenge, but fostering readers and writers rather than passing test scores is worth it.

Reading and Writing for Authentic Purposes

As often as possible, I want to model for my students that I read and write for authentic audiences and real purposes in my own life. I want my students to know that writers often write best about what they know, and I want to give them permission to bring their experiences and expertise into our classroom and into their writing. I believe in blogging as a way to bridge the personal and academic in our writing community. I will never forget the night I wrote a blog post entitled "Shattering Our Normal" about finding out my mother had cancer. It was incredibly personal, but I knew I had to share it with my students. They were busy with literary analysis and preparing for our state writing exam that requires a 26-line expository essay, but I needed them to know that sometimes writing is so much more than a school assignment.

Shattering Our Normal

Overacting. Ridiculous plot lines. Antiquated special effects. Daytime Soap Operas that follow a cast of characters through marriages, births, paternity tests, divorces, deaths, and chances to come back from the dead are no longer the bread and butter of network television. In fact, cancellations leave only four major U.S. soap operas on the air, yet I'm thankful for one show in particular.

When I was ten years old, I couldn't wait for my mother to return home from work and settle into her chair after dinner. The VHS tape would be put in the video player, and we would be one episode closer to knowing if Jason would leave Sonny and go back to the Quartermaines or whether Sonny would ultimately choose Brenda or Carly. It was a tradition passed on to me and my sister from our mother who was hooked by watching with our grandmother. ...

... Tonight, real life came crashing in, and I found out that my mother has cancer. I wanted to scream and to cry and to make sure she knows how very much I love her, but instead I went over to her house and ate some dinner as we watched the latest episode of General Hospital. Thankful for a sense of normalcy after our normal had been shattered.

We made small talk as Robin, a character thought to be dead, is reunited with her daughter. I couldn't help the tear that slipped down my face as they slowed the cameras and music for the

climactic embrace. While I know all things must come to an end, even the Soap Opera era, it is impossible to imagine not having my mom. As I tried keeping it together, I couldn't help but be thankful for all the moments we've shared because of a ridiculous show called General Hospital.

(Excerpt of blog posted on December 5, 2013; for entire post, see <http://agoss.edublogs.org/2013/12/05/writing-enriches-our-lives/>)

After sharing something so personal, I noticed a shift in our writing community as students took more risks in what they shared in their expository essays. Vanessa wrote a piece on her blog about her journey with her biological mother through Facebook and the decision about whether she was ready to meet her in person. The blog assignment was focused on our preparation to write expository essays for the state test, and Vanessa turned in a narrative. However, I had to affirm her work as a writer and let her know that this was an important piece for her to write, even if it didn't meet the expectations of the assignment.

There is a time and place for making sure that students are prepared to write the academic essays that will be required on state assessments or AP exams; however, I want my students to recognize that we write for many purposes, to different audiences, and we often blur the lines of genre much more than a state writing assessment would have us believe.

Conclusion

As teachers, Amanda and I believe in the importance of modeling a reader and writer identity and the power that brings to a learning community. Whether it is writing blog posts along with our students, doing each reading and writing assignment alongside of them, writing in our writer's notebooks, or sharing our own outside of class reading and writing with our students, we believe it is vital to be actively engaged in our classrooms. Amanda said it best in a blog she posted for the 2012 NCTE National Day on Writing.

#WhatIWrite

I write lesson plans, assignments, hall passes, e-mails.

I write text messages, to-do lists, sermon notes, and thank you cards.

I write in the blanks of forms, checks, and tax returns.

I write because I have to

I write because it helps me think

I write because it helps me remember

I write because it matters ...

If I want to teach my students to write,

I have to write beside them every day.

They blog, I blog.

They share stories from their life, I share stories from mine.

They write analytical essays over literature, I practice timed writings too.

I write to remember that sometimes it is hard to generate ideas

I write to remember the struggle of achieving the perfect order to convey what you really mean

I write to remember the time it takes to carefully choose your words and craft your sentences. ...

(Excerpt of blog posted on October 12, 2012; for entire post, see <http://agoss.edublogs.org/2012/10/20/whatiwrite/>)

As teachers we can reconsider our influence in our classrooms. Sharing our writing with students provides a powerful example as well as the opportunity for our students to know us as a person who uses reading and writing for unique purposes, as a person who uses reading and writing as part of our lives. As can be seen from these examples, a teacher modeling a reader and writer identity reveals that reading and writing are not just "school" activities—they are a part of who we are and a part of who they can be.

In spite of high-stakes testing that challenges us to think about our classroom decisions, we believe teachers can promote classroom practices that provide opportunities to develop the reading and writing identities of their students while also preparing students for required assessments. Using teacher writing as mentor text, showing students how to play with language in a variety of ways, and modeling reading and writing for authentic purposes by using our own reading and writing life as an example, we help students develop literacy skills and flourish as readers and writers. We believe that changes in curriculum, standards, or assessments must be negotiated with a constant focus on setting conditions for students to take on a reader and writer identity. It's not easy. We may have to think about ourselves and our work a little differently, but it can be done if we allow our students to be a part of our learning lives and invite them to bring their life into the classroom.

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