When Writing Gets Real (by the “Fellow Who Collected Rejections”)  

aka Richard Hartwell

After my seventh- and eighth-graders completed the State of California testing cycle, we reviewed the process. The students had many complaints. They talked about how they were bored after finishing quickly, how some teachers did not allow reading materials under the desk to be used after test completion, how so many of the tests this year were “untimed,” how too large a testing block was provided, how during the “spelling” test no scratch paper was allowed, etc. I recognized “a teachable moment.”

I decided to have these students write a business letter, complete with persuasive content, to the California Department of Education (CDE) voicing their gripes. We wrote ‘em, addressed ‘em, and mailed ‘em. And lo and behold, the CDE, in the person of one Leslie Axelrod, wrote back. The department’s hands, she said, were tied as all test administration is coordinated by the local district, etc. Students should direct their complaints to that office, she said. Good idea, I thought. So, for “extra credit” the kids can now write our superintendent, making reference to the CDE comments and gaining an important lesson in how the rabbit Warren of bureaucracy operates. But Ms. Axelrod wrote me as well.

Dear Mr. Hartwell:

I have responded to each of the letters from students that I conclude are in your class. I have also concluded that based on the topic of the letters that you, as the teacher, either directed or encouraged your students to write the California Department of Education (CDE). … To encourage students to send letters to the state rather than accepting responsibility locally is, in my opinion, very poor judgment. …

Sincerely,
Leslie Axelrod
Education Research and Evaluation Consultant
Standards and Assessment Division
California Department of Education

Mentally, I composed my reply: “Dear Ms. Axelrod, you bet I encouraged my students to write; they have opinions, too. I teach my students that it is right to write; and, not coincidentally, I try to teach them the value of the democratic process, not just of redress, but of communication.”
However, it was obvious I was drenched in trouble. I'd been stirring the kettle of dissension, and I guess the smell was too strong downwind. I quickly informed my principal and provided him a photocopy of the letter I had received. He just grinned and asked how many of my students had written letters. Sixty-five mailed of 79 who wrote them. And how many had received an answer? Only 12 as of that time, although 3 more came in during the following week. I believed Ms. Axelrod when she stated she has responded to all of my students' letters, and I can only hope the other 50 letters will arrive over the summer. The first 15 students were very pleased to get an official answer.

As I think more about this issue and its implications, I realize that it is not the first time writing has gotten me in trouble. No, I don't mean the graffiti on the walls in the boys' bathroom 40 years ago. I think they've forgotten about that. I mean, instead, the underground newsletter written in high school and stuffed in everyone's lockers overnight. I mean also the editorial written in college bemoaning the refusal to tenure a teacher and expand a popular department. And there was that research paper I wrote for a sociology class using rates of criminal recidivism I took from U.S. Army files when I was a legal clerk. Yikes, I better stop! Any more confessions and I'll end up in the soup rather than just stirring it.

Obviously, as an educator, I value writing. When done well, I value writing as the pinnacle educational product reflecting the successful synthesis of all embedded language standards. I teach writing, but I do not teach it in a void and I do not teach it as merely a timed assessment. Writing must have a purpose; whether to entertain, to inform, to instruct, or to complain. So, when students started to complain about the Stanford Achievement Test, Version 9, I had them use the tools they had been learning.

They provided the complaint, the verbiage, and the effort. I provided the instruction, the time, the facilities, the revision and editing suggestions, the address, the envelopes, and the postage. The students have (or, let's hope, soon will have) received the satisfaction of a response to their writing.

So far, all 15 students who have received letters from CDE have been ecstatic to get an answer. Thank you, Ms. Axelrod. Two have told me they are going to write back because they didn't think their questions had been answered. A third said he was going to write the district office as suggested by Ms. Axelrod. I hope they all do, although I'm not certain that they will
without the structure of the classroom.

As for me, I’ve had the satisfaction of incorporating multiple English language arts standards into a single lesson which took only about three days. And, oh, yes. I got another letter from Ms. Axelrod—a duplicate. However many times she repeats herself though, I don’t believe I will change my mind about helping students into writing that gets real.

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