

Informal and Shared: Writing to Create Community

The authors describe informal writing assignments that have helped their students develop communal bonds with their classmates and learn more about writing well.

Debbie had no idea her experience writing and then sharing that writing with strangers would make her feel the way it did. Both of us had participated in summer institutes associated with National Writing Project sites, but that was different. In summer institutes we wrote and shared our writing, but we also did many other things together. We met face to face. We ate lunch together. We talked. We got to know each other in personal ways. We knew who preferred fruit to chocolate, who would make a joke out of almost anything, and who needed to start the day with Diet Coke. We knew each other's names and faces and lives. We suffered when a father went into the hospital or a baby became ill. Our writing in summer institute was intricately tied with all the other facets of our friendships. This experience was a surprise.

It began as a challenge. Ruth Ayres and Stacey Shubitz, the authors of a blog we enjoy (<http://twowritingteachers.wordpress.com/>), encouraged followers to start their own blogs, write every day during the month of March, and then link the daily posts to their site so other followers could access them. Debbie took the challenge, mostly for personal reasons: She wanted to get back into daily writing. What she didn't anticipate was that this writing and sharing would create such a sense of community with people whose names she knew only from computer screens and whose faces she wouldn't recognize on the street. Each of her posts elicited comments from these other writers, sometimes only a few, other times many. She started to care about these responses, to care about how her

life's musings intersected with other writers' life experiences, to care enough about what they wrote to connect with them by commenting on their posts as well. Through writing and sharing—and nothing more—these bloggers built a community that mattered. From this experience, she learned a valuable lesson about the power of writing to build community. Debbie shared her experience with Adrienne, and we both reflected on how our classes had also come to depend on informal writing and sharing to develop communities. What made this experience so powerful?

Teachers know that the most valuable learning occurs in classrooms where a sense of community exists. An effective class is more than a collection of individuals spending 55 minutes in the same space at regular intervals. This teacher knowledge is supported by research showing that “learning is a social process that works best in a community setting” and that “through community, learning can grow” (Bickford and Wright). Community encourages rich learning because of the interactions among many individuals, not the limited, two-way exchange of ideas or information that is often the case when students fail to form a community.

But what makes a community? Synthesizing from a number of researchers, Deborah J. Bickford and David J. Wright explain that “a real community . . . exists only when its members interact in a meaningful way that deepens their understanding of each other.” So community requires *meaningful interaction* and *deepened understanding*, two things that can occur as a result of writing and sharing, particularly informal writing. Robert P. Yagelski

explains, “As we write, we become connected to that moment and other moments we may be trying to describe and indeed to all those other selves who may somehow figure into our writing, including potential readers who are thus connected to the writer in a real way through a future act of reading” (17). Writing, especially when we know the writing will be shared with others, promotes both deepened understandings and meaningful interactions—and these develop community, which leads to improved learning conditions.

Stevi Quate and John McDermott add specific practices that contribute to community building: communities “share a common purpose, participate in routines and rituals unique to the group, and follow norms of behavior” (16). Informal writing and sharing facilitate all these activities.

Creating a Sense of Purpose

Too often students perceive writing in school as formidable—a risk or a threat, a way to be evaluated—and not often enough as a way to learn, to express ideas, just to be a writer. When we use informal writing and sharing in our classrooms, we shift some of the focus from writing as an evaluative tool to writing as a tool for living—and thus for learning. Yagelski refers to this shift as using writing as “a way of being in the world” (7). When we think of writing from this perspective, we are more interested in what writing as an activity teaches us

or helps us discover than we are in the actual text that is produced. This different perspective can create a sense of purpose to our classroom: *We are all about learning*. When learning is our common goal, writing informally feels purposeful. Sharing writing makes that purpose even more apparent.

For example, before Debbie talks with students about *inquiry* (she chooses that word over *research*), she asks them to write informally about their experiences with inquiry/research in the past: “What does it mean to you? When have you used it in relation to writing?” Shared student responses reveal that their experiences are usually not positive.

Kimberlee: “Less than pleasant.”

Sheralyn: “I always felt dread going into it, slightly bitter I had to do it, and relieved when it was over.”

Blair: “Dread.”

Michael: “Stressed out.”

As students share these responses, they come to see that they are not alone in their feelings. They come to realize that they are a community in their common perceptions.

In this way, even sharing negative experiences about research can create a community of writers, which can lead students to better experiences with research. Debbie’s discussion with students, in this way, creates a positive out of negatives, much as multiplying two negative numbers makes a positive number.

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Next, the class reads a sequence of *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strips that deal with Calvin’s attempt to conduct research and write a research-based report (Watterson 24–25). Debbie asks students to write a letter to Calvin, indicating where he had it right and where he might have it wrong. Students pass their informal letters to a classmate to read as they prepare for a discussion about their responses. We learn from our own and others’ writing. And these shared examples of informal writing let us know that we have a purpose in this class: to focus on learning, maybe even to overcome prior negative experiences. The community is developed because we have expe-



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periences in common, both those we are sharing currently and those we've had prior to class that are now part of our community through shared writing.

Building Routines and Rituals

When informal writing at the beginning of class is a routine, students develop as writers. They come to know that they can write regularly, that they have something to say. They develop fluency, the ability to put thoughts into words. With regular informal writing, students not only develop as writers, they develop as a community, too. They know that they have this shared experience in common, this routine they can count on.

Sharing this informal writing is essential to building the sense of community, though. If students

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only write together without getting a sense of how other writers respond to the prompt or use the ritual, there is less of a sense of community. Jessica, a preservice teacher in one of Debbie's classes, recognized the importance of this sharing and writing: "I think that many of us wrote either to collect our thoughts or rant because maybe someone would listen or just read." Mark agreed: "It built a community in our classroom. We got to experience together the thoughts and feelings and expressions of writers who were real."

Though sharing one's writing seems daunting at first, the willingness and admirable courage to do so intertwines experiences and personalities to form a solid and comfortable community. Even young teens are able to break barriers through writing and reach a certain level of understanding and acceptance of one another. In one of Adrienne's eighth-grade classes, Kayden, an apparently self-confident student, eagerly volunteered to sit in the director's chair, reserved for the sharing of writing, and read his "Paper of the Week" aloud. From day to day, Kayden didn't seem to care what anyone thought of him. He was devoted to wrestling, and this was the topic of his paper.

Adrienne had previously read Kayden's paper and expressed concern about the extreme weight-loss tactics he made to excel at wrestling. He

assured her that his coach and parents were completely aware, and that his mother tolerated it but didn't like it. Later, however, she realized that the defensive tone of Kayden's paper was not about her concern at all. What she was sensing from Kayden's reading was actually a result of disparaging comments he had previously received from his classmates in regards to wrestling. He felt he had to defend the sport, his choices, his life.

As Kayden began to read, Adrienne looked around the room at the bored-but-polite expressions on the faces of her students. But as his writing unfolded with descriptions of his daily sacrifices, eyes widened and mouths gaped. She observed one girl whisper in amazement to a friend. As Kayden finished, awed silence prevailed as each student was lost in his or her own thoughts. The simple act of sharing a piece of writing had given much-needed respect and validation to its writer, possibly changing his life.

Develop Norms of Behavior

How we respond when others share their writing with us is one of the ways we build community. Our responses need to acknowledge the writing and the sharing of each writer without singling out some writers as better or others as less effective. A teacher's response can inadvertently silence some from sharing, if the teacher praises one student's writing and then responds to another's with a lukewarm comment. In class, we applaud all sharing, not only for the writing but in acknowledgment of the writer's willingness to share. These responses are part of the behavioral norms that create our classroom communities.

We have both used what we call a "walk-and-write" with our students of various ages. Based on the National Writing Project's model of a writing marathon, a walk-and-write gets us writing away from our desks by walking around the school in small groups and finding places to stop, write, and share. The only response in this situation is to thank each person for sharing. Some students would like to say more, but limiting response to a thank-you puts each writer on equal footing. Listeners are less inclined to rave over one person's writing and then offer a brief, mumbled "thank you" to another. Despite the restriction, Gary noted that "the phrase 'thank you' was helpful in creating that [supportive] climate." Heidi said that she "felt more knitted,

more than any other writing activity, to the students I did the walk-n-write with.” Gary added that in the walk and write, “writing was shared and trust transferred.” That is exactly what it means to participate in a community and in the behavioral norms connected to the writing that build a community.

Pragmatics: Prompts, Audience, Time

The kind of informal writing that encourages meaningful interaction and deepened understanding should be engaging, should be something students not only want to write but also want to share. Although journals can function like this in some classes, many times students equate journals with personal writing that they wouldn’t want to share in the classroom. We don’t call our informal writing *journals*; we call them *scribbles*. Just that shift in terminology opens some students to the possibility of writing and sharing, but we usually provide a prompt of some kind to help students generate ideas for writing. Prompts should inspire ideas and provide enough room that each writer might find a way to write *out* of the prompt, not restrict ideas or thinking to limited responses. Although some prompts might lead into writing we could polish for a grade at a later date, mostly we keep the prompts open for all sorts of responses. We want students to see the informal writing as a way to exercise their creativity or simply to write; we want it to be fun and not always overtly leading somewhere. The purpose is the act of writing, not the production of text. Because of that, this writing is not graded. It is meant to be shared and enjoyed, to help writers see themselves as writers and as part of a community.

The prompts we use vary widely. For example, we read an essay about candy (Liftin) and then write about our own favorite candy or a memory related to candy. We read short excerpts from *Guys Write for Guys Read* (Scieszka) or *Attack of the Vampire Weenies* (Lubar) and write from related prompts: a time you did something daring without thinking too much beforehand; or a “what if” based on a real experience at a fair or amusement park, a process Lubar explains led to many of his stories. Choosing judiciously, we use prompts from *Would You Rather?* (Heimberg and Gomberg), or we read a poem aloud and see where that sends us. Some days we write in response to a photograph (Kellner) or video clip or piece of art or

a picture book. The sidebar lists additional suggestions. At least once, we scribble on a paper, have a neighbor turn the scribble into a picture, and then return the paper so that the original scribbler writes a story based on the picture drawn by the neighbor. Some days we write in our topic journals (Kittle 47–48). Teachers can find many prompts that will engage their students; the secret is to inspire student writing as part of the purpose of our class—and as one of the rituals of our community.

Sharing Informal Writing: Worth the Time and the Risk

All this writing and sharing takes time, something we don’t have in abundance. As teachers, we have to evaluate the benefits of what we gain against what we give up. Since we know that writing regularly helps develop students’ writing and thinking skills, that is one benefit. We also know that students learn more when they feel part of a community of learners, feel that what they do is purposeful and valued (Willis). Informal writing and sharing builds just this type of community, so it’s a beneficial way to make the time we have do more for our students. One way to address the time issue is using digital tools for writing. Debbie has used blogs and wikis in her classes so that students can write and respond to each other’s writing outside of class, too. Since not all students have unlimited access to the Internet, this can’t be the only way we share writing. But, when it’s possible, it provides an option for increasing the sharing of writing that doesn’t take more time from classes.

Sharing is essential to creating community with writing. At first, many students are reluctant to share; it’s such a risk. But if we create a positive environment for sharing and make sure students know ahead of their writing that sharing is expected, that it is what we do as members of this community, the ability to share—either in whole groups or with a partner—grows. We share our writing in a variety of ways: sometimes by reading aloud to the whole class or to a small group of self-selected students. Sometimes we have a peer read the writing silently and write a response back. Topic journals are perfect for community building as writing is shared

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each time the journals are used. Johnny noted this sharing as a key aspect of community building: “I feel like it was in the sharing of our writings that we formed a community of writers and began to really respect and appreciate each other.” We begin to know the funny writers, the serious ones, the ones who take topics in unusual directions. This is an essential aspect of community building.

The communities we create can be powerful places for learning, if we let them. Writing informally and sharing that writing can create strong classroom communities. We can take the challenge: write and share. 

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BOOKS AND RELATED INFORMAL WRITING PROMPTS

- Baylor, Byrd. *I'm in Charge of Celebrations*. New York: Aladdin, 1986. Print.
- Write about your celebration: What is it? When? Why is it a celebration?*
- Huliska-Beith, Laura. *The Book of Bad Ideas*. New York: Little, 2000. Print.
- Write the story behind the bad idea or write a list of new “bad” ideas.*
- Offill, Jenny, and Nancy Carpenter. *17 Things I'm Not Allowed to Do Anymore*. New York: Schwartz, 2007. Print.
- Write about some good ideas gone bad.*
- Perry, Sarah. *If. . . .* Venice, CA: Children's Library, 1995. Print.
- Write a response to one of the “what if” statements . . . or write your own list!*
- Raczka, Bob. *Unlikely Pairs: Fun with Famous Works of Art*. Minneapolis: Millbrook, 2006. Print.
- Choose a pair and tell the story.*
- Seinfeld, Jerry. *Halloween*. James Bennett, III. Boston: Little, 2002. Print.
- Write about a funny/scary Halloween experience—yours, a friend's, or imagined. Exaggerate.*
- Sidman, Joyce, and Pamela Zagarenski. *This Is Just to Say: Poems of Apology and Forgiveness*. Boston: Houghton, 2007. Print.
- Write a poem of apology for something either real or imagined—or the poem you wish someone would write you. Any form will do, but you can borrow Williams's if you'd like.*
- Van Allsburg, Chris. *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick*. Boston: Houghton, 1984. Print.
- Write the story behind the picture. (And teachers might check out the new book of famous writers doing the same task, *The Chronicles of Harris Burdick* [Boston: Houghton, 2011].)*