Bill Bridges

HOW TO PUBLISH STUDENT WRITING

Short of clubbing students with threats of low grades, short of begging, pleading, cajoling, or simply demanding that they write, how can we motivate students to write? One of the best ways is to publish student writing. There is real pride in authorship; students are proud to see themselves in print and will work harder at their writing than at times when publishing is not a part of their work in English or language arts classes.

How to publish becomes the question. When the term “publish” first surfaces, teachers tend to think of long, involved, costly projects that result in neatly printed and bound books. And so some publishing enterprises are. But there are any number of ways to publish student writing, ranging from informal to formal and varying in degree of complexity. The following list, arranged by increasing levels of formality and complexity, catalogs such ventures. It is not an exclusive listing but could provide ideas for your own publishing projects.

Oral Publication

One of the most immediate ways to publish student writing is to read it aloud in the classroom. Students may balk at first at having their work read aloud and thereby shared with their peers, but if you maintain the writer’s anonymity, either by not identifying the author at all or by identifying her by a pen name she selects, this resistance should dissipate. An excellent plan for reading student writing aloud daily—publishing orally—is Rebekah Caplan’s “showing writing” approach, with students writing a paragraph daily and the teacher reading up to five paragraphs aloud each day, taking not more than five to
ten minutes of each class. (Caplan’s procedures are explained in detail in *Showing-Writing: A Training Program to Help Students Be Specific*, Bay Area Writing Project, 1980.)

You may also have your students read their own work aloud. In a “Readers in the Schools” program, students read their works to their classmates, to students in other classes in your school (with students from other classes reading to your classes), to students in other schools in your district, and to parents at PTA or PTO meetings.

**Bulletin Boards**

Establish a “For Writers Only” bulletin board in your classroom, in an adjacent hallway, outside the cafeteria door, outside the principal’s office—anywhere students are likely to be. Decorate the board appropriately, e.g., by time of year or according to some common theme the displayed writings hold.

**Cumulative Folder**

Keep a looseleaf binder or some other kind of sturdy folder for each student and stipulate a certain number of entries from each student. As the student completes each piece of writing, have him place it in his binder, so that at the end of the semester or year he has compiled a substantial body of his own work. Have him then decorate his binder, or have him bind his writings into a homemade book, complete with title page, table of contents, acknowledgements, and so on.

**Class Journal**

The class journal is similar to the cumulative folder in that the journal seemingly compiles itself, with each student contributing a certain number of entries—pieces of varying length—including notes on observations about class activities, doodlings, cartoons, individual essays, poems, short stories, and dramas. Make each student responsible for writing her entries on ditto masters so that you are not burdened with a lot of extra typing and manuscript preparation. At the end of this project each student should receive a copy of the journal.

**Letters**

Students like to receive letters, and letter writing is a relatively easy way for students to share their writing with others. Possible audiences include celebrities (who will respond to student inquiries more often than not), students in other schools or countries, and other students in your school (e.g., at the end of the school year, have your students write a letter to the students in your next year’s class welcoming them to your class, perhaps even offering advice on how to make it through the coming year).

Save copies of letters your students write and bind them and any responses to them to create a collection of correspondence.

**Class Newsletter**

To keep parents, students, and administrators informed of current and future activities, have your students prepare a class newsletter including class news, schedules of upcoming events, and pieces of student writing. Ditto the newsletter for monthly or bi-weekly circulation.

**School Publications**

Have your students submit their writing for publication in such school publications as newsletters, newspapers, yearbooks, and creative writing magazines. To encourage student submissions, sponsor quarterly or semi-annual writing contests, with the winners reading their work to a school-wide assembly or to a PTA or PTO meeting.

**Writing Contests**

Solicit local service clubs or businesses to sponsor prizes for a school or district-wide writing contest. Most people in the business community are interested in such projects if for nothing more than the advertising value and are willing to contribute goods and/or services (e.g., coupons for pizzas, gift certificates) for prizes. Topics for the pieces of writing will vary according to the season; e.g., a writing contest could be thematically based on such holidays as Hallowe’en, Thanksgiving, or Christmas, or on homecoming or graduation. Topics may also be more subject-specific, with students writing about the need for improved recreational facilities for youth. To disseminate these writings to as large an audience as possible, arrange for local newspapers to publish all prize-winning entries, or bind winning entries to create an anthology.

**Local Newspapers**

Newspapers are appropriate vehicles for publishing student writing, especially in that their doing so shows community involvement. Suggest a weekly student page or a bi-weekly or monthly student section to a local editor. To help support this page or section, students could solicit advertising specifically for such support.

**Writing Fair**

Sponsor a one-day school-wide writing fair. In a central area, display as much student writing as possible, including writing from classes or subjects other than English and language arts. Have students create posters to advertise the fair and to “showcase” the

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writing samples themselves. The kinds of writing displayed should range from descriptive and/or narrative pieces of writing to essays to dramas, fiction, poetry—any writing that students do is appropriate for display. And it would be entirely appropriate to schedule readings during the day. To make the fair even more special, invite local writers, including businessmen as well as creative writers, to speak at various times during the day about writing.

**Book Making**

Individual Books. Have each student compile a book on a topic of her choosing, with the various entries in the book being of different types. In “Science Writing in the English Classroom,” *English Journal*, April 1978, pp. 78-81), Rhoda Maxwell and Stephen Judy outline such a project, reporting that students in a seventh grade English class made their own science books, though they were anything but typical science reports. Maxwell’s and Judy’s students researched their individual topics and then prepared not only factual reports but riddles, crossword puzzles, short stories, and word games about those topics as well. Your students could do the same, though you need not limit them to writing from science—topics here are limited only by the student’s interests. Finally, such books, when focused appropriately, may actually serve as informal textbooks for other students. A sixth grade science class, for example, could prepare their books for use by first and second graders and could include experiments for those students to perform.

Class Books. Have your class pick a topic and write about it, with each student serving as a contributing author to the book. Here students may take such topics as local history (e.g., research into what life was like in the community one hundred years ago) and science (e.g., research into how a local natural phenomenon came to be or into a particular species of animal.) Linda Chittenden’s combined fourth and fifth grade class in the Old Mill School (Mill Valley, CA) published an exemplary class book entitled Our Friends in the Waters: A Book on Marine Mammals. This seventy-nine page book is chock full of information, drawings, journal writes, and cartoons about whales, dolphins, seals, and sea otters, to name but four types of the mammals discussed.

Anthologies. Producing a printed anthology can be an ambitious undertaking, but an extremely worthwhile one. Such anthologies create intense student interest, because student writers know they are writing for formal publication, and the pride they take in authorship is strong. Topics for anthologies may be broad, with students submitting their best work over a given period of time for publication, ideally to an editorial board of their peers. In such an anthology as this may appear individual essays, short stories, cartoons—whatever the editorial board agrees should be published. Anthologies may also be subject-specific, carrying pieces of writing related thematically. For example, you could publish a collection based on local folklore, a collection of humor, or a collection based on science, history, natural science, and so on. You may limit the contributors to members of any or all of your classes, or you may encourage contributions from all the students in your school. To help defray printing costs, sell copies of the anthology you produce. Contributors are eager to buy extra copies to give to parents and friends, and other students are often eager to read what their peers have written. And be sure to feature any anthology you publish in your school or public library’s “new listings” section.

**Producing Original Works**

If you have your students write dramas, then produce them, either in your own classroom for your students or in a broader setting for a larger audience. If your students write short stories, have them develop short dramas from them, and print the stories you dramatize for the members of the audience to read after seeing the play.

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As I noted early in this essay, publishing motivates students to write out of pride in authorship. If it did only this, then publishing student writing would be worth whatever effort it took. But it does far more.

1. It creates a positive, student-centered climate for writing. The teacher who publishes student writing in whatever form says to her students, in effect, that she values both the writing and the writer; this “statement” can only enhance the classroom environment.

2. The writing students do becomes real rather than existing in a vacuum, rather than being read only by the teacher for a grade. Published writing has a real audience beyond the teacher. Thus, students gain a sense of themselves as real writers, not just journeymen practicing at writing by doing one more English assignment.

3. Peer groups assume increased importance. Students engaged in publishing projects should read each others’ writing throughout the project, and as they interact with each other, moving toward a common goal of publication, they reinforce and contribute to each others’ success.

4. Publishing focuses more on the process of writing than on the product. At first, this may seem a curious contradiction, since the ultimate purpose of publishing is the production of a finished piece of writing, a product. But in writing for publication, students engage fully in the dynamics of the writing process; as they consider the needs of a real audience...
beyond the teacher, they take more care with their writing and come to understand the necessity of substantial prewriting and of repeated drafting, of revising for more than cosmetic reasons. The result is better writing.

(5) Publishing helps to decrease writing apprehension. Often, the students we meet in our classes are writing apprehensives who have had but little success. By entering actively into a publishing project, the apprehensive writer achieves success as a writer, and in learning to write and to produce good writing, that writer begins to develop self-confidence and self-esteem. Success in writing works to create a more positive attitude toward writing in particular and learning in general. The writer grows, thereby validating our work in teaching writing.

(6) Publishing reinforces learning. As a student works to “say it right,” he focuses tightly on content; in preparing a piece of writing for publication, he tends to probe a subject ever more deeply until that subject becomes his. And as he works through the final stages of the process, he considers correctness; so his understanding and use of grammar and mechanics are reinforced.

(7) Publishing helps make the English or language arts class fun. It is an active rather than passive enterprise; as such, it engages the student’s attention and interest more fully than other less active, less student-centered activities can.

What should the teacher’s role in all this activity be? Ideally, she should be consultant, a manager, a facilitator, a writing coach. Because publishing is a student-centered activity, students should assume the largest share of responsibility for it. The class involved in any of the more formal projects outlined above should become its own publishing firm and should be engaged in all stages of production—from the inception of the idea to publish through the shaping and selecting of the writing to be published to the post-production distribution of the finished product.

If our students are to value writing as something other than one more English or language arts assignment, they must write often in an environment that focuses on real writing for real purposes. Publishing projects help create such an environment. To motivate student writing—publish!

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