Spotlighting Excellence

by Denise Amos

The following teaching idea is adapted from the Louisville Writing Project Network News, December 1998.

Last February my students completed an on-demand prompt provided by the Kentucky Department of Education Portfolio Initiatives. The topic was “How to Choose a Class President.” The prompt instructed students to write an article for a class newspaper describing what kind of person would make a good class president and why. Before students began writing, I reviewed with them some of the elements of transactive writing on which they would likely be judged — a hook, supporting details and transitions, for instance.

I was so pleased with several of their responses to the prompt that I began to look for ways to spotlight their progress. I remembered a concept that Lucy Calkins introduced at a workshop I had recently attended. Calkins suggested we search for students we can make “Writing Stars for A Day.” She urged us, for example, to look for students who are trying new genres, substituting more powerful word choices or experimenting with strong beginnings.

What use could I make of Calkins’ ideas to highlight student work? I recalled a commercial poster I had displayed in my room, one designed to teach the parts of a friendly letter. Although the writing style of the poster was nondescript, I liked the annotations used to identify the parts of a friendly letter. I hoped that displaying the poster would help my fourth-grade students explore purpose and audience in their writing. Thinking about this poster, it occurred to me, “Why don’t I create a poster from one of the “class president” essays?

What better way to make a student a “star” than to turn that student’s work into a tool for teaching transactive writing?”

I chose a piece by Ross Shircilffe who had completed the “class president” assignment completely and succinctly; his order was logical and clear, his tone appropriate. I reasoned, if I were to add instructive annotations to Ross’s piece, then enlarge his essay to poster size, students who were struggling with this transactive form could benefit. I used Microsoft Word to add text boxes to label key rhetorical elements in Ross’s piece. I printed the final poster, giving copies to Ross and to each of the fourth-grade and special education teachers. We now had our classroom wall a writing model from among our ranks.

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