So You Want Your Students to Write a Book?

by Gay Rapley

"I'll bet we'll regret this by February," I laughed, sipping my red wine and shifting farther into the blast of coolness from the air conditioner. "Well, maybe," said Lisa, "but it's so exciting, and think of how much we'll learn!"

It was then August, and Lisa Brangers, Neysa Barbour-Jones, and I were sitting around my kitchen table, planning our new team-taught, African-American studies course for students from ninth to twelfth grades. We had much enthusiasm but few resources, and the only textbook available was appropriate for elementary, not high school students. One of us jokingly had said our students should write their own textbook — and suddenly, it wasn't a joke any more; we were hooked. Gradually, the idea took shape. Our students already knew about Bill Cosby, Rosa Parks, and Malcolm X. We'd have them explore the various areas of our own African-American community, interviewing and writing about people in Louisville's world of arts, literature, education, religion, business — the world of unsung heroes, of next-door neighbor role models and mentors. Laughing, hugging each other, we were as excited as kids at a basketball game. Louisville Writing Project, Kentucky Education Reform Act, this was the way to go!

By February, we didn't "regret" our decision; we lamented and abhorred it! And so did most of our students! But contrary to their "expectations" (and sometimes ours, as well), by May they had produced a book, Hidden Treasures: The African-American Community of Louisville.

This was the greatest writing effort some had ever undertaken. One student with serious writing problems and no self-confidence wrote, rewrote, rewrote, and rewrote again two good pieces — and was so thrilled she even volunteered to work in the final rewrite/editing group. Another, who told me earnestly that the book would never get written, became so inspired and excited by the people she interviewed that she ended as one of our major authors. When she wasn't writing her own pieces, she was working with very reluctant writers and was overheard saying things like, "I'm not sure what you mean, here, Sean. Can you explain it a little more? Oh, yes, I see; so why don't you just say it like that? It sounds good."

Two ninth graders were so obliging and prolific that as the deadline approached and notes came in from last minute interviews, I'd hand them to the students, say "Help!" — and they'd just sit down and write outstanding pieces. Our toughest writing problem came from a severely learning-disabled student who worked incredibly hard and wrote volumes of totally incomprehensible sentences. But thanks to some wonderfully patient students, she produced two articles for the book.

In addition to the book's becoming a reality, our goal of making the students aware of the cultural richness of Louisville's African-American community was also met. Once the students overcame their fear of interviewing people, they were elated by how kind everyone was to them and impressed by the many accomplishments of their subjects. When a group went to the studio of sculptor Ed Hamilton (who has now achieved national fame), they were honestly awestruck, and one commented that she had no idea we had people like that living in Louisville. Two students who interviewed Lyman Johnson, a noted civil rights leader...
and educator, were so enthused that they both felt compelled to write their own separate articles about him; neither could bear to give him up.

On the downside, about one-third of our students, primarily the ninth graders, simply refused to participate. We finally had to put them on independent study. We were mistaken in thinking that students who don’t like to read books would be excited about writing one, and these children were not yet ready for a major writing project.

Unfortunately, that was not our only mistake. As a twenty-year veteran, I am embarrassed by the number and ridiculousness of our errors. Since we had primarily worked with older students, we blithely assumed that all our students: had the poise to call and speak to people they didn’t know; could find names and phone numbers in phone books; could call several people with the same name until they got the right one; could think up questions to ask and take notes on the answers; could read their own handwriting; and actually cared about writing a book! Wrong, Wrong, Wrong! Naturally, we had to go back to the beginning and make sure the basic skills were in place. Then, after our intense nagging, students made repeat phone calls and, with profuse apologies, did repeat interviews.

In all fairness, we also had some undeserved difficulties to overcome. To our dismay, the twelfth graders decided the ninth graders were too unruly and uncivilized to deal with, and they pretty much opted out of working with them. We had hoped the seniors would be our “co-teachers,” but the two groups just didn’t mesh. Also, because the grant money and matching funds from the National Writing Project mini-grant didn’t arrive until late in the school year, we were unable to buy tape recorders; consequently, the students had to rely on their own writing/note-taking skills for many of the interviews. Students with poor skills often ended up with three lines of information from ten minutes of conversation. The worst problem, however, was contacting the people to be interviewed; I think every contact took a minimum of five phone calls. Answering machines spoke to other answering machines; work numbers were confused with home numbers; fifteen students would try to call from school with only one phone available; students had to go all over town for interviews which meant leaving other teachers’ classes. It went on and on. By comparison, teaching the kids how to write up their interviews almost seemed easy.

On the “upside,” the final two months of the class, spent in the Mac lab, were absolute bliss. The thinking, writing, experimenting, collaborating, rewriting, and peer conferencing that occurred was truly the writing process at its finest. Although the book was not as long or complete as we had planned, we were vindicated; the horror of February was just “paying our dues.” “But never again,” we vowed. We were exhausted.

Then came October of the following year. The book arrived from the publishers. Dedication ceremony, news coverage on TV and in newspapers, more and more book orders (45 from the public library), requests for consultations—Heady stuff!

Would we do it again after all? With what we know now? Yes, we would like to—and we’d be glad to help you. So you want your students to write a book? Profit by our frustrations, errors, and joys; write us for a list of caveats and recommendations; they have emerged from the blast furnace of experience.

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