The Sound of Shackles Shaking: Toward Student-Centered Writing

by

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My students often come to me with the attitude of victims — passive about an environment they feel unable to control, and hardened to the plight of others. Problems miles from home do not concern them. But whether the problems are global or national, or whether they are in their own community or peer group, these students still maintain the distance of spectators. Simulations designed to move them one step closer only suffice to add emotion to analysis. It never occurs to them that they might do something about the problem. This year I began to probe. What made them feel so helpless to change anything? If they were the victims, who was the oppressor?

There seemed to be no issue to them worth looking at closely, worth personally fighting for. "One person cannot make a difference," students would tell me when they were asked to write a call-to-action. I wondered what it would take to shake their indifference. Did they need to be told the stories of people whose personal convictions had changed a life or started a movement? If I used dramas or graphic descriptions, would I be able to call up a sense of morality and responsibility to others? Would I need a community activist to engage them in a local crisis-in-your-face? Was there a magical instructional strategy or radical heuristic that could cut through the conditioned callousness and reawaken in them the ideal that to take action was to take control?

The irony of the situation was not lost on me, for I, too, had felt this way, shackled to others’ agendas, chained to my own silence in fear that to move might set off an explosion. I grew up with the ethic that neutrality was good, conflict of any sort, bad. This attitude is de-meaning, for it requires us to be satisfied with life as it happens to us. Yet it is an easy attitude, contagious because others’ inaction seems to make it right. How could I, as a teacher, help them take charge of their own lives? Could I take my own liberating lesson back into my classroom?

So began my introspection. Research and dialogue posed problems, provoking me to probe, assert, defend, refine, rethink and focus. I discovered a disturbing trend in our literary magazine; though our student body is half Mexican-American, almost all the published articles were by whites from advanced classes, the privileged elite. Most students, including mine, avoided tough topics, the wrenching issues that reflected their world. When they did speak of inequalities, they reflected the narrow opinion of the status quo.

How could this happen? Was this the fault of parents, drugs, violence, the media, the system that consistently gutted education and increased class size? I felt hopeless. Certainly, it wasn’t me. My writing class was performance-based; I assigned “authentic” topics aimed at publication or production; I combed newspapers for issues to ignite student writing; I allowed range within a topic; I built in an audience, encouraged connections to their world; I ran peer-response groups, conferenced with writers, responded to drafts, asked for revisions. I did everything.

That was the problem. I chose the topics, I controlled the themes, I asked students to imagine an audience. No wonder their writing was passionless. It wasn’t situated in their experience or related to their own purposes. When administrators imposed agendas on me, my chains rattled. And if I felt hopeless, how did they feel about my agendas imposed on them?

As I began talking to other educators, the obstacles and options became more clear. Hope replaced help-
lessness. I became the author of my own agenda. What motivated me might, I realized, motivate my students.

I have turned myself inside out, adding my voice to those working for educational reform. I seize small opportunities. When someone asks, "What did you do this summer?" rather than reply with the rejoinder Robin hates, "I did the Writing Project," I say, "I wrote with educators from across the grade levels and disciplines who believe writing can change people's lives." That generates a few follow-up questions. When people ask, "What was the course you led at UCSC about?" I answer, "Teachers were sharing methods that provoke students to think, that put learning in the students' hands."

When teachers ask, "What's the district series you're teaching going to be about?" I say, "It's for teachers who teach other teachers about the best practices in the classroom, the kind reflected by CLAS." I provoke discussions about how we institutionalize failure, about tracking, about writing as the responsibility of all educators, about how teachers teach the writing process and why teachers aren't teaching other teachers in our school.

My concern has come to mean taking political stands, writing articles for my union, writing this article, talking to my school board. It means investigating community links and finding other researchers and teacher researchers working on these questions. It means listening to students—to their doubts, frustrations and limitations. It means steering students along the developmental path Moffett and Piaget describe, moving from writing about the self to eventually writing about an issue to an unknown audience. It means valuing exploration, exploiting error as a means of learning, rewarding risk and NOT putting the weight on a behemoth paper at the end of the unit.

It is not my job to set the agenda and expect students to conform to social rules and expectations. I want more democracy in my room, with students choosing issues, purposes, and audiences and having more say in their evaluations. I want to model dialogue which is not adversarial but in which assertions are questioned. I want literature that reflects cultural and gender diversity. I want to feel less alienated from other disciplines.

Viewpoint

I hear Tomasita Villarreal's voice in my ear. Her classes of Spanish speakers at Aptos High are student-centered, experiential, community-based, values-oriented, participatory, and research-minded. Tomasita says, "Teach them structures and processes and they can take these wherever they go." I'm giving up the literary magazine advisorship to step back and reflect, to talk with other teachers such as the Amnesty International advisor whose students dramatized and fictionalized human rights abuses in essays to other students.

Moffett discusses how students move from collaborative discourse through reciprocal prompting to independent writing. He claims that "the more speech of other people one takes in, the more original will be his permutations and the freer he will be of any limited set of voices. Liberation is a matter of hearing out the world" (87-88). I would take it a step further. Liberation is going public, unshackled by fears that silence us, understanding that we are all agents of change.

References


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