"Our Wal-Mart Is Bigger Than Our Mall": Writing That Matters

by

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The best school writing is real writing. When I plunged back into my classroom after a summer with the West Tennessee Writing Project, I brought this idea with me. By real writing, I mean writing that has an audience outside the classroom. Typically, I want my students to write about themselves or an issue that genuinely concerns them and then send their work off beyond the classroom room to a literary magazine, a newspaper, a politician, an author. But, of course, the opportunities for real writing, while theoretically limitless, sometimes wear a bit thin. We want our students to write about their concerns, not look around for something to be concerned about so that they can write.

That’s why my students at Dyersburg High School and I owe a special debt of gratitude to Mr. Ken Mink. It was Mr. Mink who—in his innocence—riled us up to do some real writing.

Mink, who is managing editor of the Harrisonburg Virginia Daily Record, had written an opinion column about the 50 worst places to live in America, and there we were—Dyersburg—Number 38. Actually, Mink did not have a lot to say about Dyersburg or any of the other 49 places on his list. After all, this was a newspaper column, not a book-length guide about places to avoid.

Mink wrote that Dyersburg was “too far from Memphis, too far from St. Louis, too far from anything but cornfields and catfish.”

When our local newspaper contacted Mink to ask him what had motivated this outburst of bile toward our community, he managed to dig himself in deeper. It turns out his knowledge of Dyersburg was based on his experiences “passing through”: “I lived in Kentucky and went to Arkansas State University in Jonesboro, so I’ve been through Dyersburg many times,” Mr. Mink said. He insisted his column was written “tongue in cheek ... a spoof of the Money magazine list for trying to pick the 100 best places to live when there are thousands of good places to live in this country.”

Whatever Mr. Mink’s motivation, my first reaction to his article was one of indignation. Why did he feel a need to pick on Dyersburg, just a typical, small southern town with a population of about 17,000? But my indignation quickly turned to excitement when I realized Mink had presented my seniors with a chance to do some real writing. These students typically fall into two categories: those who despise their hometown and those who defend it. Regardless of which camp they were in, students were going to have a chance to write on a subject they cared about.

We keep journals in which we write a few times weekly, and as a prompt for journal writing I asked students to respond to Mink, offering reasons why they agreed or disagreed with him. When time was called, many students did not want to stop writing. There was so much enthusiasm for the topic that we decided we would respond to Mink personally. In groups of four and five, students composed replies. I gave them only one direction: Whatever position you take, make sure you develop reasons for your opinion.

With no more preparation than this, students managed to draw on many of the classic techniques of argument.
1. Some adopted a moderate, reasonable tone, contrasting with Mink’s flippancy:

   Every town has its flaws and Dyersburg is no exception. But our strengths over-ride our weaknesses. Dyersburg is just a really pleasant southern town where one can walk down the street and not worry about being shot or mugged.

2. Some questioned Mink’s expertise on the subject of Dyersburg:

   We think you should find out more about Dyersburg before you say it is one of the 50 worst cities to live in.

   Mr. Mink, you were only passing through Dyersburg and saw the outside of it. We have seen what is important: the hearts of the citizens.

   If you have any more sarcastic remarks about our town, we suggest you make them after you’ve lived here a while.

3. Some supplied pertinent facts which Mink either ignored or did not know:

   Our school, Dyersburg High, is over 20 years old and looks like new.

   Pollution is not a problem even though we have several large industries. The Wildlife Management system has a commendable program in our area.

   By the way, our high school is ranked among the top 50 in the United States.

4. One group asked a series of rhetorical questions intended to make Mr. Mink squirm a little:

   Mr. Mink, in your opinion, what makes a town a good place to live? Is it kids killing kids, beer joints, drug abusers, and towns full of hate? If this is your idea of a good town, then we’re glad we’re not one.

5. Many added their own rhetorical twist to Mink’s words, building his language into their arguments:

   All those cornfields and catfish bring our town a lot of money.

   ...the crime rate is lower than in St. Louis or Memphis. For example, we’ve never seen a catfish pull a gun on a fisherman or a cornstalk hold a grudge against a farmer.

   Mr. Mink where do you think the corn, corn dogs, cornbread and popcorn products that you find in the supermarket come from? That’s right — cornfields.

   One interesting letter came from a group of students who claimed to be in agreement with Mink, but because the group partially echoed Mink’s “tongue-in-cheek” tone, we are not sure if they are altogether serious:

   We are residents of the “38th Worst Place To Live.” We are too close to Frogjump, Tennessee and are too far from Memphis. We also agree catfish has lost its taste and corn fields are burned up from environmental pesticides. Our Wal-Mart is bigger than our Mall. The only youth activities are illegal. Finally Dyersburg is right on top of the epicenter of the New Madrid “Death Zone.” We appreciate the fact that you brought the rest of our community to realize what we were trying to get them to.

   We collected the letters and sent them off to Mr. Mink. And then something remarkable happened. Mr. Mink wrote back. Not that we had not expected some kind of
polite, businesslike “thank you,” but Mink’s answer went far beyond the requirements of good manners. His answer made clear that he actually had read the letters, and that fact itself made the assignment worthwhile. The students’ writing had made a difference. Someone from the “real world” was responding.

Mink made useful suggestions. Writing in response to the comment in one of the letters about the negative effects of small town boredom, he said:

...Boredom does breed drug use and more casual sex. These comments certainly indicate Dyersburg does need to consider building a teen entertainment center. Kingsport TN, is a good example of how a city recognized such a problem and built a special teen center for recreation, special dances, etc.

He argued back:

Kim Damarow, Kristy McLaughlin, Sam Moore, Christy Wallace and Jeffery Yarbrough pointed out that Dyersburg is a safe place with a low crime rate, but then so is Bat Cave, N.C., but it is not much fun to live there.

He answered our jokes with his jokes:

I especially enjoyed the comment of Shelly Martin, Mandy Brimm, Nichole Townson, and Levi Morgan [who pointed out that] they had never seen a catfish pull a gun on a fisherman or a cornstalk hold a grudge against a farmer. Neither

have I, but I don’t really watch Letterman every night, so I don’t know. ...

In short, my students and Ken Mink were having a real world conversation, and all parties seemed to be enjoying it thoroughly.

Now, a year later, the dialogue between my students and Mr. Mink is a vivid and inspiring memory for all of us who were involved. Thinking back on the experience, I remain a bit surprised that the great majority of my students came to the defense of their hometown. The activity made them think through their feelings. Early on, shared journal entries and lively class discussion won more students over to being supporters of Dyersburg than detractors. One reason this support for Dyersburg surprised me is that it is much easier for all of us to be negative. Seventeen and eighteen-year-olds, in particular, tend to be hypercritical of anything that has been around longer than they have. Whatever their stance, my students came out of this assignment strongly committed to what they believe.

Also surprising to me was the enthusiasm, even passion, that this assignment generated. In a time when I keenly feel challenged to excite and interest my students, this activity was one that carried far beyond my expectations. When I look back at the ingredients that made this writing work, I find that it had three qualities which blended to give it special power: The topic was current; it was a subject my students knew about and one about which they felt strongly. Timeliness, relevance and passion made this writing work. This is not a brew that presents itself everyday. But next time these elements combine, I will be there.

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