A Teacher’s Guide to Planning a High-Interest, Engaging Writing Project

Dominic Carrillo - Anglo-American School of Sofia, Bulgaria

If I tell students that their next writing project will be published on a blog or elsewhere online, I might get the apathetic response: “But nobody is gonna’ read it.” There may well be truth to this statement. I admit. But then I share a very short, real story with them.

Three years ago, an 8th grade student of mine--during an Open Letter Blog Project-- wrote a heartfelt message to any teenager who was considering suicide. Her blog-posted plea urged any at-risk teen to reconsider and choose life. One month later, as the owner of the blog, I received an email from an anonymous teenager who claimed my student’s letter stopped her from killing herself! The message brought me to tears and made me realize: This is about as authentic and meaningful as writing can get!

Though this life and death anecdote is exceptional, the powerful real word connection hits home for the students. Their writing does matter, and publishing—even if it’s for an audience of one-- makes a difference. When writing to an audience beyond the classroom, student motivation and genuine interest can be unlocked within a well-guided, self-publishing project.

Motivation First

Whether it’s a persuasive letter, essay, memoir, or short story, I emphasize to students that their writing will be published (online and in print) and will have thousands of potential readers. Skeptical at first, they believe me when they see prior examples of writing online and well-trafficked YouTube video projects. Simple blogs don’t seem to excite them all that much, but knowing that a book will be for sale on Amazon.com usually does. Yet, while a printed book and a “real” audience initially sparks their attention, students still require a deeper sense of purpose to truly motivate the substance of their writing.
The writing topic should both peak their interest and somehow connect to the real world and to the interests of their intended audience. For example, my most recent writing project with 8th graders was called **The Letter Project**. The purpose was persuasion. Students were directed to write a persuasive, essay-style letter to someone famous or influential who the student felt could affect positive change if nudged in the right direction. The idea was that if Donald Trump or Miley Cyrus didn’t actually read their letters, then at least an online audience would get the message. Framing the project this way allowed for considerable student “choice and voice,” as they could pick any figure (from a celebrity icon to the Korean Minister of Education!) and discover their own persuasive style along the way.

As their teacher, I am also writing for an audience. As I write, I hope I also motivate and inspire. Over the years I have explored how to model so that my modeling has the possibility of being witnessed and internalized by my students, as I find ways to make this important task manageable and meaningful for myself.

Modeling can be replicated by teachers at a variety of levels with a variety of intentions. The most important: Do the assignment yourself, is common advice for all teachers so they can better understand the obstacles and pitfalls of the work, and also use the product as a model (ideally open for critique/feedback as well). Thus, the audience becomes the students and, perhaps, even colleagues. This level of modeling tends to pay dividends in student learning. It shows students that writing is a process and needs continual refinement, and gives students a strong exemplar to work from. Also, it doesn’t hurt that I have written a YA novel that my students are familiar with (mainly because it’s shelved in my classroom library). Perhaps it helps motivate them if they view me as an ‘authentic’ writer, but my author aura (if any ever existed) likely fades within the first week of class. In the long-run, it’s the intrinsic motivating factors that move students forward with enthusiasm for the project.

Writing Starts with Reading

The most well-known writers agree: Good writing starts with good reading. In my class, every publishing project begins with reading great models in the same genre. If we’re writing short stories, we’ll read and analyze Hemingway, Chekov, and Shirley Jackson; if memoirs, we look at excerpts of Maya Angelou, Malala and Malcolm X. Every publishing project includes sharing former student work and something I’ve written for the students to critique and practice giving feedback. This portion of the prewriting process could last a few days or a few weeks. During this time, we pull in the standards, be they Common Core reading standards or MYP/IB skills and aims of deeper intercultural, personal, and conceptual understandings, and ask questions about story elements, the author’s voice, intention, audience, theme, characters, and organization. Hitting such a broad set of skills engages students with a greater sense of purpose within the larger publishing project process.

How do you know if engaging students in genre and in student work-- as you pull in, flesh out, and engage students with standards and skills-- makes a difference to the student experience? Students begin to ask: How will reading this literature make my writing better? Which author will I use as a model for my writing? What will my voice, theme, and organization be? How will it come across to the audience? These questions are not posted up on my classroom wall. They emerge organically because all of the students know that their stories will be in a printed book, for sale on Amazon. Writing for publishing becomes a big deal. Some students even begin to see stars and dream of dollar signs! In most cases, the letter grade (extrinsic motivation) becomes secondary. Students pride in publishing a quality story (intrinsic) becomes the primary goal.

Bad 1st Drafts and Good Feedback

It’s important to keep in mind that it’s difficult to start writing and even harder to share your writing with a group of peers. There has to be a shared understanding of ‘ground zero’ and must be a clear protocol for giving feedback.

I recommend dedicating a full class period to discussing bad first drafts. I begin by asking ‘What is difficult about writing?’ After ‘pair-sharing’-- or however you prefer to spark discussion-- we read and discuss Anne Lamott’s “Shitty First Drafts.” If you teach young or sheltered kids, this brief excerpt can be photocopied and censored. Regardless of iteration, the piece initiates great conversations and reinforces the idea that good writing is crafted primarily through revision and editing, not some mysterious inherent talent. Engendering a Lamott mindset gives students the courage to write and the idea that their first drafts will improve. In other words, stop thinking about it and just write!

After students have had time to write their first drafts, writing workshop is set to begin. I prefer a circular workshop seating arrangement, so all the students are facing each other. To relieve any tension or stress that students may have in sharing their work, I make anonymity an option, where I (or other volunteers) can read the work of other unnamed students. Before sharing, I do my best to establish what Ron Berger calls the ‘Culture of Critique.’ I explain that writers don’t want just any feedback, they want specific, quality feedback. While I encourage starting off with a positive comment, I also clarify that saying, “Good story, I liked it” might momentarily boost the writer’s ego, but is not helpful enough. On the other hand, commenting that a writing piece was “boring” or “sucked” is also not a true critique, it’s rude and hurtful. The emphasis of critique is on giving helpful and specific feedback on the piece-- what all writers want, and in fact need, in order to improve. Understanding, identifying, and delivering quality critique is hard, no matter the age and skill of the writer.

Critique gospel in my classroom: “Critique and Feedback, The Story of Austin’s Butterfly.” There is something powerful in watching adorable 2nd graders give quality feedback and commentary on student work, that results in even middle school and high school students buying into the value of this critique method. And it doesn’t hurt that Austin’s final draft turns out to be remarkable.

Ultimately, students see the value of quality feedback and are ready to critique knowing that the end goal is to create excellent, publishable writing. Student participation in the workshop increases not only because of authentic interest in the project, but also because they are familiar with the writing process, discussion and presentation strands of the standards (i.e. The students know the criteria and that they’re graded on it). Whole-class peer critique goes from being a dreaded and uncomfortable idea to a purposeful and valued part of the process.

The Peer Editing Funnel

Early in my teaching career, my mentor English teacher once told me that he never read a student’s first draft. Flat out refused. I laughed, but he wasn’t joking. He explained the student-led editing funnel: workshop editing, peer editing and gallery editing. The aforementioned whole-class workshop editing helps get the big picture kinks out by sparking reflective questions that apply to all writers: Is the piece clear? Does it make sense? What is the theme? The intention? Is it effective? What’s it missing? What needs to be cut? It might take two full class periods to get through every student, but keeping it down to five pieces of feedback per story and having students share only their first page makes it manageable and time efficient.

The second round should be familiar to all English/Humanities teachers: peer editing and revision. Students are given partners and they must closely check their peer’s writing with a checklist and give detailed feedback. The last round of group editing is the gallery walk. Students print out their writing and post it on the wall. The class is instructed to pick a story to scan for final edits and quick fixes, then they rotate when cued. During the entire filtering process, I make sure to check in with each student individually or through commenting/suggesting changes on their shared Google doc. By the end of it all, students are usually impressed with how much their writing has improved through revision and editing--and most of it they’ve done through effective peer collaboration.

Early Finishers = Publishing Team
All teachers appreciate their self-starting, over-achieving students, but what do you do with them when they’ve finished light years ahead of everyone else? Within this kind of writing project, they are assigned a leadership role in the publishing process. As part of the publishing team, they can become the chief editor, an editing team member, formatter, or cover designer. Perhaps they can even take on the role of “event manager” or “lead marketer” for a school library unveiling, book sharing event, student exhibition, or social media blitz. Once roles are allocated, I make sure that a few essentials are understood.

First, a master Google doc must be created for all the students to paste their final written work and for the editing team to scan as copy editors. (Google docs is an excellent tool for this task). Second, students in charge of design and formatting must acquaint themselves with the chosen online publishing platform, Createspace, Lulu, or Blurb, and watch related tutorials. Third, if students are keen on getting their books some real exposure, marketing teams can be formed to research and make a social media plan or local events program for promotion. By this phase, there is typically such a sense of purpose and an “authentic job” for each student that the project runs itself, and I can troubleshoot and help the struggling students with greater ease as we wrap it all up.

Conclusions
Aside from being authentic, this kind of writing project hits almost all the other education field buzzwords-- differentiated instruction, peer collaboration, inquiry-based learning, project-based learning-- while covering nearly all of the language and literature MYP/IB and Common Core standards. Students seem to genuinely enjoy collaborating and come to understand the value of thorough editing. I won’t pretend that every student ends up loving the writing process, but they definitely walk away respecting it, and have learned new writing strategies along the way. Lastly, I have described some of my favorite writing project plans, but there are many different options and websites that feature a long list of teachers’ favorite authentic writing projects. It’s amazing how much intrinsic motivation and inspiration

comes to students who know that their work will be published online, printed, and will ultimately reach an audience outside their classroom.

About the Author

Dominic Carrillo currently works as a middle school English teacher at the Anglo-American School of Sofia. Dominic is passionate about creating project-based, authentic, mindful learning experiences. Dominic earned his bachelor's and master's degrees at UCLA. He is the author of three books, including *The Improbable Rise of Paco Jones*, a YA novel about a biracial 8th grader navigating the challenges of middle school. Website: [http://www.dominicvcarrillo.com/](http://www.dominicvcarrillo.com/)